

Opening

The conference was commenced by welcome from Prague Media Point Steering Committee Member, Alice Němcová Tejkalová, and opening remarks by Maja Sever.

Alice Němcová Tejkalová, Charles University, Head of the Department of Journalism, Czechia

“Sustainability is more than just a buzzword for today’s conference”; it is central to a viable democracy, although its necessity is often underestimated. The purpose of the day is “to share positive examples, good experiences, and network with one another” in order to foster the sustainable media system needed for a good democracy.

Maja Sever, European Federation of Journalists, President, Croatia

“We are all here today bound by the same motive: an awareness of the importance of journalism in society.” Defending democracy is growing increasingly difficult, and so we need to talk, connect, and discuss how to support it and one another. “Currently, fellow journalists are dying while reporting in the Middle East and in Ukraine. But it must not be forgotten that journalists are targets in their daily work too,” facing pressures from employers, and threats and intimidation from institutions and politicians – both of whom must take responsibility. Journalists are guardians of truth, and “we must find a way to defend journalism as a public good.”

The Developing Framework of Media Regulation in Europe

In cooperation with Prague Civil Society Center

As the digital landscape continues to reshape the way we consume and disseminate information, European countries have been adapting their regulatory frameworks to maintain a balance between preserving freedom of expression, ensuring media diversity, and safeguarding against misinformation and hate speech. What have been the main focal points of the discussions about EMFA on the European and national level? Which areas attract the greatest discord? Is there realistically a one-size-fits-all framework that can effectively enhance the media safeguards in Europe, notwithstanding the region? How can we make the changes most effective?

Moderator: Dominika Bychawska-Siniarska, Prague Civil Society Center, Senior Advisor, Central Europe Programme, Poland

The moderator provided context and a general frame for the session: the European Union has developed the Digital Services Act and the Audiovisual Media Services Directive. Just yesterday (November 30), Vera Jourova announced a Trilogue deal on new anti-SLAPP rules. An EU AI Act is on the table. And the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA) aims to promote a pluralistic media across the European Union, independent public service media, editorial independence, transparency of media ownership, and safeguard against media concentration.

Maja Sever, European Federation of Journalists, President, Croatia

- “There has been 15 months of talk on the European Media Freedom Act.”

- The European Commission have been very ambitious in their intentions, but “there is a need to ensure real implementation of this act on the national level.”
- Changes are being proposed to Article 4 – the protection of journalistic sources – under the guise of national security, and Article 5 – the independent functioning of public service media providers. “Every little voice speaking up against” any weakening of the articles is important.
- **Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and partners published the Paris Charter on AI and Journalism in November 2023**, stating that ethics must govern technological choices within the media, human agency must remain central in editorial decisions, the media must help society distinguish between authentic and synthetic content, and the media must participate in global AI governance and defend the viability of journalism when negotiating with tech companies. It is work that EU regulation should cover.

Lucie Sýkorová, European Centre for Press & Media Freedom, Supervisory Board Chair, Czechia

The speaker provided a comprehensive overview of the EMFA.

- Among the key articles of the EMFA are:
 - Art. 4 – protection of journalistic sources
 - Art. 5 – safeguards for the independent functioning of public service media providers (adequate funding and ensuring independence of management and board members).
 - The Hungarian and Polish cases found that EU rules on appointment of management and board members could have an impact.
 - The Czech experience highlights that transparency rules are not enough; much hinges instead on election procedures.
 - With regard to adequate funding, independent public service media providers have long been underfinanced in Czechia and Slovakia, with the latter removing the licence fee in July 2023 (meaning financing is to come directly from the state budget). In Hungary, there has been a problem with overfunding, inhibiting editorial independence as the non-transparent and uncontrolled flow of public money to the media ends up fostering loyalty to the donor.
 - The EMFA does not actually define what is meant by “the public mission”, leaving its interpretation over to national law.
 - Art. 7 – speaks of independent national media regulatory authorities.
 - But does not give any new instruments to coerce member states, draws on Audiovisual and Media Services Directive for mechanisms instead.
 - Art. 11 – provides for an independent European Board for Media Services.
 - Art. 17 – provides for the moderation of media content by online platforms.
 - Art. 21-22 – provides for an assessment of media market concentration.
 - Lacks rules for what constitutes an effective assessment of media market concentration.
 - Article 24 – provides for the allocation of public advertising.
- “The overall idea behind the EMFA is not to regulate media but create an enabling environment for independent media to exist.”
 - Quote of Gábor Polyák regarding the EMFA’s impact on Central-Eastern Europe.

- <https://verfassungsblog.de/too-much-for-others-too-little-for-us/>

Theresa Josephine Seipp, University of Amsterdam, Researcher at AI, Media, and Democracy Lab, Germany/Netherlands

Covered the EMFA in terms of big tech and Artificial Intelligence.

- The current context:
 - New powerful actors.
 - New power concentrations in the media (market power, data power, algorithmic/AI power, technological/infrastructural power)
 - Shifting opinion power (from legacy media to unregulated tech platforms).
- The problem of AI is that it relies on data and computing power, which only big tech has access to. A related issue is that traditional media concentration laws are outdated, and nationalized.
- The EU is aware of this problem and has pushed without success in the 1990s and in the EU Democracy Action Plan to address it above the national level.
- The EMFA has the potential to:
 - Standard-set.
 - Harmonize media pluralism tests.
 - Facilitate cooperation between national authorities.
 - Facilitate cooperation in assessing the role of big tech in media mergers.
- The EMFA has limitations in:
 - Going beyond EU competencies.
 - National implementation and enforcement mechanisms.
- The EMFA isn't the only attempt by the EU to limit this 'shifting opinion power.'
 - AI Act proposal – has the potential to address data and market power
 - Digital Services Act – addresses algorithmic transparency and user choice in recommendation systems.
 - However, “these attempts focus mainly on economic concerns, neglecting the social and cultural risks of big tech and AI” (and thus journalism risks being neglected).
- Overall, the asymmetrical relationship between AI and the media remains; the structural power imbalance looks like it will continue under the EMFA. In fact, “the EMFA even has the power to empower big tech,” as it overlooks their role as access and distributor services, and lets these companies decide who is and isn't a media actor.
- The future of the EMFA looks to enable fair competition and space for alternative providers. However, media law needs national-level reform, including the stimulation of and investment in independent media innovation, as well as political and democratic safeguards (for example, to prevent lobbying by big tech).

Tadeusz Kowalski, Broadcasting Council/Warsaw University, Member/Ass. Professor, Poland

- The aim of the EMFA is to strengthen the editorial independence of media companies and preserve media pluralism in the face of counter-attempts.

- Yet enforcing these principles is a problem, as there is no definition of pluralism in the EMFA, and additionally, multi-ownership structures of media companies obscure the true owner.
- The broad scope of the EMFA has dangers; too general a mechanism and it will be impossible to implement – equally, it could be used to excessively repress. Particularly, its implementation may go wrong in captured states.
- With different attitudes towards the proposed changes, the EMFA again raises the problem of the European community vis-à-vis member states.
- Overall, “effective implementation of the EMFA could take a number of years while the media landscape is changing very quickly.”

FORMAT DEVELOPMENT FOR YOUNG AUDIENCE CONTENT

In cooperation with Czech-German Future Fund

In this session, the presenter will talk you through a design sprint process employed at the ENTR, a pan-European youth-oriented project. It will be followed by a short, interactive version of such design and content creation through collaboration. Participants will learn about the method and improve their ability to create stories from (collective) ideas. Speaker:

Lukas Hansen, Deutsche Welle, ENTR Editorial Lead, Germany

During the workshop, Lukas Hansen presented the ENTR network which creates content for young Europeans as well as the key features of the Design Sprint method and showed an example of an informational video shot in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Later, five steps in creating content through this method were presented:

- Mapping out – understanding the problem in depth, asking experts, setting goals and target groups, considering limitations and possible obstacles
- Sketching – creating as many ideas as possible, focus on finding solutions. Is based on brainstorming, on working with members of the audience, general public, etc.
- Decisions – selecting a selection of ideas and working with them further, assessing what works best
- Prototyping – testing the proposed ideas in near-real conditions (emphasis on long-term potential testing, esp. with regards to resources)
- Testing in the real world – learning from the audience feedback (general user and creator of content can still differ)

The moderator stressed that it is important to look at the content through the eyes of the recipient at all stages of the process and to follow the latest trends. Finally, the attendants could get involved in a creativity development activity, namely the Crazy 8's (the Sketching step), and presented some of their ideas.

Impact of Propaganda on Disinformation Scene in Central Europe and the Western Balkans

In cooperation with the International Visegrad Fund

This panel aims to shed light on the multifaceted challenges posed by these phenomena and foster a deeper understanding of the strategies needed to combat the manipulation of information in these regions. How can we better face misinformation vis-a-vis the environment of war and polarizing elections? How to enhance the efficacy of journalism and adapt the work of media with regards to tackling these disruptive influences?

Moderator: Jeremy Bransten, RFE/RL, Regional Director for Eastern Europe, USA/Czechia

The moderator opened the session by alluding to the evolving trends under this theme, stating that they “include an increase in the volume of disinformation, the development of AI tools, monetary incentives to spread disinformation, opaque social media algorithms favouring engagement, record low levels of trust, and prominent national politicians openly echoing disinformation, and often pro-Kremlin, talking points.”

Lutfi Dervishi, Investigative Journalism Lab, Trainer, Albania

- *On the question of whether there is a generational divide between how people consume digital information:*
 - “Everyone is vulnerable to disinformation. Social media is the main source of information for the young; and it is where most disinformation takes place. It is TV for the older generation, which is where the propaganda is. So ultimately, we are caught between a rock and a hard place.”
- Albania faces its problems in the media due to overcrowding and a lack of editorial structures, and so media companies “are driven to get more money and more clicks with a lack of care about editorial standards”. Politicians are also becoming a primary source of disinformation and propaganda, particularly with their large social media followings. So, the problem in the Albanian media is mainly within; it is not Russia or other external actors, but rather that it is weak in structure.

Blanka Zöldi, Lakmusz, Editor-in-chief, Hungary

- *On the question of how to manage Orbán’s claim to national sovereignty with his contradictory use of pro-Kremlin talking points?*
 - “It is the environment we, as Hungarian journalists, have to work in.”
 - Just this week, Hungary proposed a legislative bill to protect Hungarian sovereignty, targeting foreign-financed journalists and non-governmental organizations with this legislation. The text itself is very vague, with the potential to target anyone critical of the government.
- “Lakmusz is not alone in working in this environment. We launched in 2022, were co-financed by the EU and are part of a bigger network of cooperation. It is important that Lakmusz keeps

doing its job in this environment,” particularly due to significant disinformation around gender dysphoria and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Tech companies also have a responsibility in giving a voice to such disinformation through political advertisements.

- “It is important for Lakmusz to increase the resilience and knowledge of our own audience to carry out factchecking. We cannot reach everyone; and those most difficult to reach are typically those most vulnerable to disinformation. So, we teach our audience how to talk to people; how to communicate with those at risk of disinformation.”
- As Hungary has already seen the state capture of media, it is important for any media regulation to cover other media sources beyond the state.
- *Specifically on the European Media Freedom Act:* “I am curious as to what the fate of the EMFA will be; all the very dangerous possibilities the bill leaves open is unacceptable.”

Tomáš Kriššák, Gerulata Technologies, Senior Stratcom Consultant, Slovakia

- *On the question of why Slovak society seems so receptive to Kremlin-sponsored disinformation:*
 - The past ecosystem of Russian influence and propaganda remains strong.
 - Local politicians helping to normalize Russian propaganda in the Slovak information space.
 - The proponents of Slovak disinformation have termed it “civic media,” to further popularise its spread. In actual fact, a “false world has been created; a new reality.”
- “A working democracy requires investment in democracy – in a legal and transparent way”.
 - It may come from transatlantic or European partners, but “a cultural transition” would first be needed to accept foreign-entity funded projects in Slovakia.
 - Moreover, “I have cynicism” and “a distrust toward dependency on foreign donors”, as they do not follow pace with what is needed in-country.
 - The main conclusion is to fundraise within the country itself. The citizens of a given country “need to sacrifice their wealth and time to create a sustainable democracy.”
- There will be “a lot of work ahead to change back to liberal democracy – and not a hybrid form of moderated and controlled democracy”.

Examples of replicable and impactful investigative journalism in the V4 and Western Balkan countries

In cooperation with the International Visegrad Fund

Presentation of successful investigative, cross-border or cross-sectoral journalism projects with special focus on uncovering corruption, kleptocratic networks and organized crime in CEE and WB. What are the benefits and challenges of this growing trend in investigations? Should it be promoted more, and should we perhaps aim for an increasingly more structural cooperation, or does it interfere with independence too much?

Moderator: Anna Gielewska, Fundacja Reporterow/VSquare.org, Deputy Director/Head, Poland

Bojana Jovanović, KRIK, Deputy Editor, Serbia

- Outlined the case of the “Suisse secrets” - <https://www.occrp.org/en/suisse-secrets/what-is-suisse-secrets-everything-you-need-to-know-about-the-swiss-banking-leak> - <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/feb/20/credit-suisse-secrets-leak-unmasks-criminals-fraudsters-corrupt-politicians>.
- “The leak gave information we would otherwise never get.” It included data on Serbian citizens, so local investigative media worked to identify who they are and where the money came from. Several public officials were uncovered, and “shady businesses” and “mafia links” were discovered.
- Captured institutions do not stop us from doing this job, because the impact and purpose of investigative journalism is to “give true information to citizens; to inform.” Additionally, “change will come” and we should preserve evidence for future investigations.

Jovo Martinović, Lupa, Director, Montenegro

- Outlined the international collaborative investigative journalism efforts regarding “the e-gambling affair” in Montenegro, Hungary, and the UK - <https://www.investigativejournalismforeu.net/projects/the-e-gambling-affair/>.
- This reporting “raised noise to try and prevent further illegalities.” The purpose of this investigative journalism is “to work in the public interest.” Autocrats try to distract from such revelations by “swamping” the information space. But “it is our duty to persevere and do as much as we can.”

Márton Sarkadi Nagy, Freelance/RFE Hungary, Investigative Reporter, Hungary

- Outlined the investigative work on Russian influence in the campaign for the Hungarian minority in Romania - <https://vsquare.org/the-shadow-of-russian-influence-appears-behind-campaign-for-hungarian-minority-in-romania/>.
- Practical tips for replicable and impactful investigative journalism:
 - Look at cross-border interactions, not just within one country. Go beyond immediate neighbouring countries.
 - Look through old data; there will be more unsolved puzzles to piece together.
 - Data from investigative collaborative networks is valuable.
- *On whether there will be a time that Orbán will be held accountable:*
 - “I do not believe there will be a time, but Orbán likes one thing more than sovereignty; it’s the image of his sovereignty.” And so, this kind of reporting can make an impact – albeit not in an obvious way – to change policies.

Tomáš Madleňák, Investigatívne centrum Jána Kuciaka, Investigative Reporter, Slovakia

- Outlined the Saxian case - <https://www.icjk.sk/282/Bodorovci-sa-v-Holandsku-snazia-dostat-k-milionom-eur-cez-firmy-ku-ktorym-sa-v-minulosti-nepriznavali> and its much wider connections.

- “For change to come, a journalist had to die [Jan Kuciak]. People shouldn’t have to die for the rest of the public to wake up (...) The people who were in power when Jan Kuciak was murdered are in power again. I am hopeful they will not succeed this time.”
- Practical tips for replicable and impactful investigative journalism:
 - There is utility in tabloids - they can write stories in a way voters can understand. The same with TV. Cooperation between investigative and other such media was encouraged.
 - It is important to cooperate within borders as well as beyond borders, “so that autocrats do not act one way at home and one way in Brussels” and can “be held to account at the international level as well.”
 - Moderator reasserted: “It is important as investigative journalists that we track the hypocrisy and make it visible”.

A PUBLIC INTEREST FRAMEWORK – TOWARDS A HEALTHY ONLINE INFORMATION ECOSYSTEM

In cooperation with OSCE RFoM

While journalists were traditionally known to be the most important editors of public interest information, nowadays they share this position with a growing number of other actors in the media and information space. Large online platforms have become a dominant source for news consumption, and they undertake many functions of information management that was previously carried out by more traditional media actors, such as editors and publishers. Their content governance processes therefore tremendously influence media freedom. This session aims to explore the possibilities of superimposing a public interest framework, in other words, a scheme for recognizing and prioritizing media content that serves the public interest; and deliberate the opportunities and challenges of such an approach.

Moderator: Julia Haas, OSCE, RFoM Project Officer, Austria
Katarzyna Szymielewicz, Panoptykon Foundation, President, Poland
Barbora Bukovská, Article 19, Senior Director for Law and Policy, Czechia
Amy Brouillette, IPI, Director of Advocacy, Hungary

The speakers dealt with the issue of a healthy media ecosystem and outlined how to ensure it, especially in terms of social media and platforms. Barbora Bukovská argued that a healthy system means a resilient system capable of absorbing changes. She also called for more research into what in fact is the state of play vis-à-vis platform regulations, their possibilities and what content should be prioritized and how. Amy Brouillette stressed that there should be a broader definition of public interest journalism encompassing all types of media that serve the public interest. In other words, we should also deliberate more on what we actually want to encourage as opposed to limit in the information space. Katarzyna Szymielewicz stressed the importance of natural engagement pattern which makes users much more reactive to borderline content. According to her, the key to promote

high quality content online is to change the default algorithms of the platforms and to make them prioritize public service journalism. Tools aiming at a healthier information space such as the Journalism Trust Initiative (JTI) and the need to introduce different business models were later discussed.

CROSS-BORDER MEDIA COLLABORATION IN EUROPE

In cooperation with Czech-German Future Fund

Exchanging perspectives across national and societal borders is vital to nurture understanding and bridge differences. Cross-border journalism plays an important role not just in bringing audiences together, but also journalists working in cross-border editorial teams. What does collaboration look like in practice? How difficult is it to identify topics relevant to different audiences? What are the opportunities of connecting different experiences and values? This session focuses on two such projects - ENTR and JÁDU.

Moderator: Patrick Leusch, Deutsche Welle, Head of European Affairs, Germany

“Even though the nature of journalism is competition between organisations, public and private media could still collaborate (such as in the case within ENTR)”.

Dominika Michalak, Onet.pl, journalist and editor of the ENTR Project, Poland

Reneta Veselinova, Dir.bg, Video and Content Producer, ENTR Project, Bulgaria

Tereza Semotamová, JÁDU, Editor, Czechia

Brief information about projects

About **JÁDU**: <https://www.goethe.de/prj/jad/cs/index.html>

They launched in November 2011 (version DE-CZ). Since 2023, they have been part of journalistic project **Perspectives** (7 partners), co-funded by the European Union (EU). The website is written in four languages (Cz, De, Sk, and Uk). They believe in constructive journalism (solution-oriented) and are not afraid to have an opinion.

About the **ENTR** project: <https://entr.net/en/>

They are not EU news. Young target group: 18-34 European, exclusive to social media.

Target audience: Pay attention to non-cosmopolites, those who are sceptical or dismissive of European values, not targeting far-right idiots. They run platforms daily in seven languages (German, French, English, Portuguese, Romanian, and Polish). Plan to reach 12 languages.

Performance: 24 social media channels, 9000 contents per year, very high engagement rate.

Key-takeaways of the session:

1. Benefits of media collaboration

Reneta Veselinova: In Bulgaria, people prefer updating news through social media (FB) than news. It has become a challenge for Dir.bg, one of the biggest media organizations. That is why Dir.bg decided to join the collaboration on the ENTR Project. After weeks, we can see the rating of the young audience is higher. It is having a huge impact on gaining media trust in young Bulgarians.

Dominika Michalak: More creative to produce diverse news.

Tereza Semotamová: Readers or team members themselves get totally different perspectives than what you could get from a Google search.

2. Challenges in media collaboration

2.1. Finding a good topic for every market

Normal procedure:

- Take hot topics => Spark them to be debated and discussed on the platform by readers. The way to measure the interaction of the audience is the efficiency of collaboration.
 - Onet.pl: If there are some interesting topics from specific countries, other members could reflect on them in their own countries.
 - JÁDU: Other representative countries give various opinions about topical issues, such as the housing crisis.

=> Nature of Collaboration:

Same approaches, structure, or even angles, but the content could be or need to be different; in that, a variety of cross-border journalism will be created.

2.2. Cross-border teamwork

- Meeting online creates some problems that cannot be solved: people are either so nice and friendly that they do not share their own opinions or so aggressive and dominant. Sometimes, they say the same thing, just with different words.

Young team

- "Honeymoon collaboration" at the beginning (funders, team's mindset in the same room), then everyone seems to be aggressive. It gets hard for a team to reach an agreement because they do not have the skills to deal with differences and disagreements.

How do I deal with it?

- Team members do not need to know everything from the beginning. While we start discussing, topics or new ideas will emerge from diverse experiences and perspectives from different countries.

- Make sure everything—techniques and security—has been collaborated with by experts.
- Tereza Semotamová: Need to set some frames or arrangements to deal with differences (cultures, languages).

2.3 Grants for Collaboration

As in the case of ENTR, collaboration exists in public media. Journalism is often a national issue but under European law. In other words, a collaborated journalistic project is a domestic issue that is at the same time under international law. Therefore, this kind of project often faces some difficulties in raising funds.

Raised Questions

- Does digitalization drive media collaboration?
- Don't you think it's easier to create a collaboration if you understand other perspectives?

Coming together: Cultivation of an engaged journalistic profession

Between losing public trust, financial austerity, disinformation, decrease of personal safety, platformization, and the rise of AI, the profession is quite unlike what it was some 20, 10, maybe even three years ago. Currently, difficult discussions are being held about how to protect what lies at its heart without rendering it immobile and dysfunctional. In what ways can journalists effectively come together to ensure their mission, and livelihood, is more sustainable? What helps journalists cross over the competitive divides and defend not just individual interests, but their collective? How can we induce more mutually supportive environment? How can we build on top of the already spreading day-to-day collaborations?

Moderator: Christian Christensen, University of Stockholm, Professor of Journalism, USA/Sweden

The purpose of the discussion is to talk about the notion of solidarity – “cross-collaboration between journalists on projects, but also a common professional identity.” Solidarity is seen here as a professional identity, factoring in wages, working conditions, mistreatment by authoritarian elements, etc. Therefore, “the conversation extends collaboration beyond the typical to consider the idea of a unified professional identity.” “Labour instability, insecurity, reduced membership in labour unions – all play into collaboration and solidarity.”

- *The final question asked if we are missing anything, since discussions on threats to solidarity tend to focus on those emanating from the state.*

Maja Sever, European Federation of Journalists, President, Croatia

- There is a solidarity between journalists in Croatia – for example, when changes to criminal law were proposed to counter whistleblowers, a petition spread quickly among networks. So

“when there is need, there is solidarity”. Typically, “we can find solidarity when professional rights are threatened”.

- However, the question of joining a union is another. Despite its progressive nature, there is a lot of reasons why journalists do not, including that private media owners/editors-in-chiefs threaten those that are considering joining, there is a lack of solidarity when talking about workers’ rights/labour rights’ issues. For example, Bosnia and Herzegovina does not even have a union for journalists.
- Yet, there is an obligation for governments and political authorities to include you in activities, so “it is important to be loud and organized.”
- *On the question of if this conversation is missing anything, since discussions on threats to solidarity tend to focus on those emanating from the state:*
 - The problem starts at the beginning – talk to young people and early-career journalists, tell them the importance of organizing. “Raise them to understand this care, solidarity, and cooperation to fight for the protection of labor and professional rights”.
- “We have this responsibility to try to build a society for journalists to fight for themselves, protect themselves, and their labor rights”.

Dorota Nygren, Poland's Association of Journalists and Authors of the Public Radio, Board Member, Poland

- There has not been enough journalistic solidarity in Poland; “over the last eight years, we were living in the darkness”.
- Yet there were six main protests over the course of the past government - mainly taking the form of petition-signing. They were “solidarity-building exercises.”
 - For example, there was a march and 900-signature petition from journalists of “not to lie, not to harm” following the death of a 15-year-old opposition MP’s son. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/mar/07/poland-ruling-party-under-fire-after-suicide-of-opposition-mps-son>.
 - There were also signatures for the authorities to not restrict the media following the wave of Women’s Strike protests in 2020.
 - There was an action “day without politicians”, where in response to the speaker of the Sejm attempting to limit media access, journalists responded by limiting politicians’ presence on websites and in newspapers.
- However, there is a lack of more long-term work in progress.
- *On the question of if this conversation is missing anything, since discussions on threats to solidarity tend to focus on those emanating from the state:*
 - Solidarity for democracy. It was seen that there were “two sides in Poland’s journalistic community” over the last 8 years – those sympathetic to the government, and those not. “When a government is destroying liberal democracy, journalists have to tell people what is happening. It is not easy; in Poland they were labelled as opposition media.” Journalists need to “find solidarity between us to fight for democracy. Because democracy is also freedom of the press. We need solidarity for democracy.”

- Identifying media. At a time where “everyone can pretend to be journalists,” those who actually are need to label themselves as professionals and find solidarity for doing so.

David Klimeš, Endowment Fund for Independent Journalism, Director, Czechia

- It is typical of post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe that there isn't solidarity between journalists.
- Attacks by politicians on journalists and an economic dependency on centralized sources for the media put journalists off expressing that solidarity – even though this situation highlights why solidarity is necessary.
- However, journalistic solidarity will never look the same in the CEE region as in its North European counterparts. “We are not able to take models from Northern Europe and place them in CEE.”
- *On the question of if this conversation is missing anything, since discussions on threats to solidarity tend to focus on those emanating from the state:*
 - A central problem is the “shrinking space for good standards in mainstream media.” The common base of journalism is being eroded.

IN SEARCH OF SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR INVESTIGATIVE AND OTHER FACT-CHECKING JOURNALISM

In cooperation with the International Visegrad Fund

This panel focuses on successful examples and strategies of finding the resources for investigative and other kinds of fact-checking journalist work in order to ensure stability of journalistic platforms, so that such media can fulfil their role of fomenting transparency and backing democratic processes. What are the recent developments in grant-making and funding-obtaining in Europe? Is there a growing understanding of regional specificities on the side of the funders? What can investigative and other kinds of fact-checking, focused media do to make their financial foothold more stable?

Moderator: Tarik Jusic, Prague Civil Society Centre, Head of Central Europe Programme, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Leila Bičakčić, Centre for Investigative Reporting, Director, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Florian Skrabal, Dossier, editor-in-chief, Austria

Zlatina Siderova, Programme Lead Grants, EJC, Netherlands

Peter Erdelyi, Centre for Sustainable Media, Director, Hungary

Key-takeaways

1. Challenges of investigative journalism (Peter Erdelyi)

- Advertising, audience revenues, grants – all can compromise the mission and (perception of) independence of the outlet.
- If you don't have a paywall, you need to provide other services - you can monetize your core content only, or have other means of services for the audience - events, paid forum with the authors etc.
- Most people get into supporting investigations by emotional trigger -> you need to sustain that, keep readers emotional (it has to be valuable and be regular) – sustainability is a long term process.
- It's important to reverse the top-down tradition in journalism -> give content that the audience is interested in (and audience revenue naturally pushes you to do that).
- In most environments, people will support journalism if it's meaningful for their lives. Even 300 supporters is enough for a smaller community -> and if you have that, utilize it when applying for funding.
- We will see more money for investigative journalism in CEE than ever before (USAID, MDIF, EC...). Use it now.
- You need someone in your organization to go behind traditional output -> experiment, spend time on it, find your niche.

2. Leila Bičakčić, Centre for Investigative Reporting, Director, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The team has 24 people. CIN has lots of milestones, ups and downs. 2016: Challenges when turning to multimedia

- The most important strategy is trying and testing all challenges, then falling, and at the same time, learning something and doing something different next time. The scary part is revisiting the site every day to fulfil the requirements of funders, who are asking for new things every time.
- CIN's decision: not involve journalism in fundraising. Most panellists are obsessed with paywalls. CIN wants to do journalism.
- Having scary thoughts about paywalls means demanding higher responsibility. Actually, it is not easy to build paywalls in Bosnia because of many obstacles. One of them is that the bank does not allow online donations.

How do you gain audience engagement?

- Trying to keep audiences following the investigative story. There is no benefit of advertisements for our content.
- Building value: Call to donate from 5 euros.

3. Florian Skrabal, Dossier, Editor-in-chief, Austria

- Funding comes from subscribers.
- Members/Crowdfunding: We don't have paywalls. Since 2019, we have

started selling magazines and membership cards. Since 2021, subscribers have risen to 6,000.

Scheme:

- Always have a plan.
- All roads (email, social media) lead to one site.
- Be simple.
- Find partners and re-tell your story.
- Give your work value.
- Adapt to inflation at the moment. Encourage people to pay more for membership.
- Subscribers could help fund other ex-subscribers who could not afford subscription.
- Other ways to fund or build up relationships with the site are: organising workshops or training; and selling films that they produce.

4. Zlatina Siderova, Programme Lead Grants, EJC, Netherlands

- Since 2018 IJ4EU Programme: supports cross-border investigative journalism.
- Target: Try to stimulate the creation of collaboration in investigative journalism because they believe it is a way to develop long-term sustainability. Although some people exaggerate or underestimate cross-border investigative journalism,
- Possess fund: 3 million euros
- EJC provides training and online classes; this is beneficial in the long run.
 - Challenge: Limited funding circle. The next round will be held in 2 years.
 - Success in building media trust from E. Commission
 - It is hard to find a balance between flexibility and accountability. Comes with practice.
 - Suggestion: Focus on your impact, your community, and your audiences.

WORKSHOP ON DIGITAL SAFETY FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISTS

In cooperation with the International Visegrad Fund

Capacity limited - registration required (contact project coordinator). This workshop focuses on capacity-building enhancing safe digital practices and data protection whilst conducting investigative or any other sensitive reporting. It will be open to anyone interested, be that journalists themselves or other professionals who collaborate with and support investigators, watchdogs etc. Limited capacity

Speaker: Aleksa Tešić, BIRN, Investigative Journalist and Trainer, Serbia

During the workshop, Aleksa Tešić, an expert on digital rights privacy intrusion, presented different types of surveillance as well as different ways of protection from them. The participants were sharing their experience with surveillance. Some of the most important applications ensuring online safety have also been presented during the session.

Among the topics discussed were:

- Who could spy on you and what tools are nowadays most often used?
- How can you protect yourself? Who protects your privacy other than you?
- Assessment of readiness of the attendees for a possible attack on their data
- Risks of reportedly “safe” platforms and domains

SOUND STRATEGIES FOR SMALL MEDIA IN HIGHLY CONCENTRATED MARKETS

In an era marked by technological advances, the proliferation of digital platforms and the democratization of content creation have opened up new avenues for small media to reach wider audiences and find their niche. However, the landscape is not without its challenges. In many markets, a few dominant players wield enormous influence, making it increasingly challenging for smaller media organizations to thrive and compete. This panel explores the innovative approaches and best practices that can help small media outlets steadily navigate, find their foothold, adapt, and prosper in highly concentrated markets.

Moderator: Slawek Blich, Krytyka Polityczna, Deputy Editor-in-Chief, Poland

Lela Vujanic, Sembra Media, Project Oasis Research Manager, CEE, Croatia

Danuta Bregula, MDIF, Expert-in-Residence, Poland

Jan Bělíček, Alarm, Editor-in-Chief, Czechia

Key-takeaways

1. **Lela Vujanic, Sembra Media, Project Oasis Research Manager, CEE, Croatia**
(<https://projectoasiseurope.com/>)

Project Oasis: Strategy for Survival - a year-long research project into the sustainability, innovation, and impact of independent digital native news organisations in more than 40 countries across Europe. Its goal is to bring greater visibility to digital native media organisations and to uncover new insights about the trends, opportunities, and challenges in this growing market sector.

- **Digital native media:** initiatives that were started online and publish content exclusively. Many launched by “entrepreneur journalists.”
- 540 media organisations in 44 countries: case studies of private digital media in Croatia, Hungary, Armenia, and Lithuania
- Sound strategies focus on specialised areas of coverage and niche topics; new product development and diversified revenue sources; innovative journalism formats; and multi-channel interaction with audiences.

Main challenges for small media:

- Platform: Based on social media, we do not have a website. Debate about returning to the website.

- Funding: coming from the public, EU, or private. Funds often make media chase the fund's requirements, lose focus on the actual work.

2. **Danuta Bregula, MDIF, Expert-in-Residence, Poland** (<https://www.mdif.org/>)

- We are entering a second cycle of the subscription hype -> no scheme works for very long because the way people consume media changes so frequently, even with serious topics. And we have the news fatigue and avoidance trend growing which is the biggest concern for everyone, regardless their size.
- The common failure cases of subscription schemes: not knowing your audience in depth and/or working with a brand image and marketing strategy that worked before (not only legacy media) -> but the readers' perception of you may have changed already. Another problem is giving up too soon when subscriptions don't kick off quickly.

3. **Jan Bělíček, Alarm, Editor-in-Chief, Czechia** (<https://a2larm.cz/>)

Strategy for gaining audience engagement:

- Automate newsletters. We need to be ahead of the new movement.
- Focus on younger readers and listeners.
- Escape "backout" by building up your own community: Have donors for major campaigns every year.
- 2019: Met major financial crisis. Elon Musk stopped funding. They needed to get back to readers and ask them for help. Jan was surprised how readers have funded back to Alarm. Try to think of ways to encourage donations from readers. Get thousands of people as donors. Now they estimate Alarm has 14,000 donors and doesn't have any financial problems.

Raising Question

How long do strategies work and depend on donors? Is there a possibility of long-term strategies?

- Jan Bělíček: As long as they still have reliable sources, the funding situation still works. So far, the Czech media landscape is very dense, so everything could change. You cannot run media with just big words.
- Danuta Bregula: It is very easy to convince readers from the beginning, especially those who have followed the media site for years. However, in the hardest cases, they would stick with something rational and tangible, not just words.
=> watch trends in digital marketing. E.g., young people are more pragmatic now. If they see an interesting, rational content and can afford it, they are much more willing to pay/donate for it than their parents.

A healthy mixture of income in small media?

Diversification of income is key. The subscription model which is becoming so popular now is vital, but it cannot work for everyone. It works for media which are unique thematically or they were the first in their respective field etc., but in the small populations of Central or Eastern Europe, we simply do not have enough capacity for subscription-based models for everyone (at least to make it sustainable).

Public funding was highlighted as an important helping hand in CEE – and it still holds potential for creativity (supporting public service media through taxes, funds for non-profit media core staff etc). But that rests on political will (and the voters, indirectly).