

# **Pandemic Lessons for Democracies: High Time to Provide Journalism as Essential Service with a Financial Lifeline**

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**Summary:** The COVID-19 crisis has revealed a steady demand for professional journalism as an essential public service. However, the disfunction of the conventional advertising-supported business model has affected an overwhelming proportion of the industry workforce. This article contributes to the discussion on thinkable solutions. It argues that the pandemic has created further empirical evidence to support Habermasian ideas of providing a lifeline for the quality press as a vital contributor to the public sphere, a pillar of good governance in Western democracies. Amid the global challenge posed by the emergency, professional news organizations have proven their essentiality as providers of reliable information vital to tackle healthcare system and policymaking tasks. However, the legacy media are progressively less able to perform their social functions, losing the competition for revenue to the Big Tech. Therefore, liberal democracies should fund independent journalism to ensure the latter remains strong in the post-coronavirus world, holding the political systems accountable. The paper concludes that the pandemic has fostered an environment conducive to translating the feasible policy options into concrete political steps, regulation and lawmaking.

**Keywords:** journalism, media, essential services, public good, disinformation, COVID-19 pandemic, Habermas, democracy

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# 1. Introduction

The novel coronavirus has caught humankind by surprise as an emergency of biblical proportions. Faced with an unprecedented threat to human existence in peacetime, governments worldwide have not scanted monetary incentives to support the economy and urgent monetary policy and regulatory measures. Instead, political leaders have introduced urgent policies and have taken advantage of *carte blanche* to restrict certain rights and freedoms, such as freedom of movement under quarantine, giving rise to suspicions about rolling back democratic norms.<sup>1</sup> Diamond asserts that the financial support of Western democracies to independent media is crucial for refuting “both the pandemic and the tendency of rulers to use the pandemic to aggrandize their power and eclipse civil liberties.”<sup>2</sup> An extreme ambiguity on whether effective coronavirus treatment can be found has become fertile soil for sowing plot theories and falsehoods and fuelling public anxiety. Not only did it exacerbate existing bitter societal divisions such as racism and xenophobia, eroding security and confidence in democratic institutions, but it also aggravated risks to public health.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, the fluid situation has shown great social interest in reliable information. The booming demand is being served both by the old news outlets as well as the media startups recruiting both AI and human brains for fact-checking in Europe and the rest of the world.

Indeed, the novel coronavirus crisis has produced the most persuasive to date empirical evidence supporting Habermasian ideas of taxpayers’ subsidies for the quality press, highlighting the vitality of the professional mass media ecosystem. Still, the press has been increasingly less able to perform its social functions, losing ad dollar competition to digital platforms. In turn, the latter have mutated into regulators of access to information, affecting public opinion and voter behaviour. In the post-coronavirus world, Western democracies should ensure the functioning of the independent media. The pandemic created abundant evidence for overdue political and regulatory changes to provide an economic for the fourth estate to protect the health of democracy.

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Helsinki Commission (2020). *Chairman Hastings Denounces Unchecked Power Granted to Hungary’s Prime Minister Orban*. [online] CSCE. Available at: <<https://www.csce.gov/international-impact/press-and-media/press-releases/chairman-hastings-denounces-unchecked-power>>

<sup>2</sup> DIAMOND, L. (2020). *America’s COVID-19 Disaster Is a Setback for Democracy*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <<http://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/americas-covid-19-disaster-setback-democracy/610102>>

<sup>3</sup> UN News. (2020). *During this coronavirus pandemic, ‘fake news’ is putting lives at risk: UNE-SCO*. [online] Available at: <<https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061592>>

The global journalism industry has been in crisis for decades, seeing the gradual breakup of the historically built business model.<sup>4</sup> The mechanics of journalism systems was dramatically different from what looked perfectly stable before the digital era. The gatekeeping function was a key, allowing mass media to curate and shape public discourse for most of the XX century.<sup>5</sup> In the free world, where citizens routinely change leadership through voting, the independent press always played a central role as a source of credible information. As an integral element of the system of checks and balances between state institutions, public agencies, and branches of government, the mass media are commonly known as the fourth estate. Serving educated readers and audiences, the most reputable news organizations provided first-hand reports and basic fact-checking in the pre-Google era. The higher demand rose for the quality press, the more lucrative the news production became. Concurrently, journalists were growing in importance as a watchdog, becoming accepted increasingly as the eyes and ears of the public. What made this mission possible was the media's dominance over content delivery channels, either in print or on the airwaves. In the 1950s, the audiences "could count the number of television channels on the one hand and rely on Walter Cronkite and a local media monopoly to control the flow of information."<sup>6</sup> Thanks to that privilege, newsrooms exerted their news judgment – mainly for the public good as they grew a reputation for accuracy, essential for voters making informed decisions. The textbook example of the power of the independent journalistic institutions in democratic societies is the Watergate scandal, the defining emblem of the press's vital role in a democracy.<sup>7</sup>

While media have proved its vital role as the cornerstone of democracy, the arrival of the Internet has enabled everyone to get exposed to enormous amounts of information. What is crucial, the material reaches a mass audience rapidly. However, at the same time, the credibility is not proved before publishing in the same manner as had been done by the centuries-old, based on the monopoly over channels of the content delivery system of news judgment and fact-checking, operated by the professional newsrooms – the traditional media gatekeepers.

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<sup>4</sup> PETERS, C. AND BROERSMA, M. (2016). *Rethinking Journalism Again: Societal role and public relevance in a digital age*. [online] www.taylorfrancis.com. Routledge. Available at: <<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/e/9781315716244>>

<sup>5</sup> SOROKA, S. N. (2012). The Gatekeeping Function: Distributions of Information in Media and the Real World. *The Journal of Politics*, 74(2), pp.514–528.

<sup>6</sup> THOMPSON, D. (2018). *The Post-Advertising Future of the Media*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/post-advertising-future-media/578917/>>

<sup>7</sup> SCHUDSON, M. (2004). Notes on Scandal and the Watergate Legacy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 47(9), pp.1231–1238.

The technology became a game-changer in the media industry, depriving the journalism enterprises of the ability to fund its costly newsgathering and investigative reporting through the advertising-based model as the digital platforms seemed to win a competition for the revenues. Thus, it is in Western democracies' own best interest to fund independent public good journalism, holding the political system accountable. It is important to note that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted this problem while lending itself to the opportunity to translate some feasible policy options into concrete political steps, regulation and lawmaking.

## 2. Descent of the advertising-based revenue model

Things changed drastically, arguably in perpetuum, starting from the late 1990s when the legacy press began to experience the digital revolution's effects. With the arrival of social media, the traditional ones, once indispensable agencies of information, have been less and less prominent, except to provide "grist to the mill" for a public discussion they no longer control.<sup>8</sup> Soon, the traditional press suffered severe financial fallout from the seismic shift as ad money migrated to new competitors. In 2019, spending on digital advertising in the US, traditionally the world's largest advertising market, was poised to surpass print and TV for the first time.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, by 2021, web advertising is predicted to account for 52% of global ad expenditure, exceeding the 50% mark for the first time.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the century-old and increasingly profitable advertising-supported revenue model that allowed the press to thrive without public funding while serving the best interests of free citizens began to fall apart. Struggling to offset lost advertising revenue, news organizations rushed to refocus their revenue plans on paid subscriptions. Predictably, only a few of them, mainly the leading mainstream outlets, have protected the content with paywalls. Even so, for local news outlets, opportunities to fund their operations are limited by the market

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<sup>8</sup> DORNAN, C. (2018). *Journalism and Society*. A lecture at School of Journalism and Communication. Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada.

<sup>9</sup> Statista (2018). *Ad spend in the world's largest ad markets 2018* | Statista. [online] Statista. Available at: <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/273736/advertising-expenditure-in-the-worlds-largest-ad-markets/>>; SHABAN, H. (2019). Digital advertising to surpass print and TV for the first time, report says. *The Washington Post*. [online] 20 Feb. Available at: <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/02/20/digital-advertising-surpass-print-tv-first-time-report-says/>>

<sup>10</sup> THOMSON, S. (2019). *Internet advertising to surpass 50% of total ad-spend in two years*. [online] Digital TV Europe. Available at: <<https://www.digitaltveurope.com/2019/07/08/internet-advertising-to-surpass-50-of-total-ad-spend-in-two-years/>>

size and general lack of interest from the rich.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the media patrons focus on a handful of selected, well-known news brands and pay little attention to small-town papers.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the subscriber-funded model significantly restricts public access to publications created under strict high-quality standards.

That is essentially fraught with more profound polarization between elites and the broader, underinformed and suspicious audience, which is only exacerbated by the limited access to the sources of quality information and professional and scientific opinion. Not surprisingly, many readers resort to the readily available, accessible, and sensationalist content on social media, often being lured by clickbait. This trend is destructive for content quality as media workers strive to get more clicks to make a living.<sup>13</sup> Besides, over the past decade, the industry has seen thousands of well-trained editorial staff laid off or pushed by hardships, such as severe burnout and uncertainty about the future of their profession. In the US, newsrooms have lost half of their employees since 2008, and despite subscription surged for the most prominent national broadsheets, circulation and revenue fell across the industry, according to Pew Research Center.<sup>14</sup> This loss contributed negatively to the overall quality of media coverage, often shaped by the financial strain and, perhaps, in the later electoral success of politicians riding the global populist wave.<sup>15</sup> Eventually, digital platforms have taken over the legacy press's gatekeeping functions and influence, controlling readers' news diet. The impact is the technological limitations on news outlets' ability to deliver professional quality journalistic products to the public. These days, social media giants are setting conditions for news distribution to the public while relying on algorithms rather than human editorial judgment. That often impairs the quality of reporting.

The digitation of information has rejuvenated old malicious methods. Consequently, the end of journalism as we know it, the omnipresence of social media and the explosive growth of populism are threatening the public debate and

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<sup>11</sup> The Economist (2017). *How leading American newspapers got people to pay for news*. [online] The Economist. Available at: <<https://www.economist.com/business/2017/10/26/how-leading-american-newspapers-got-people-to-pay-for-news>>

<sup>12</sup> CUNDY, A. (2019). Newspapers back on a roll. *The Financial Times*. [online] 18 Oct. Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/9ec5a23e-d928-11e9-9c26-419d783e10e8>>

<sup>13</sup> DE WITTE, M. (2018). *What this Stanford scholar learned about clickbait will surprise you* [online] Stanford News. Available at: <<https://news.stanford.edu/2018/03/21/this-stanford-scholar-learned-clickbait-will-surprise/>>

<sup>14</sup> GRIECO, E. (2020). *U.S. newspapers have shed half of their newsroom employees since 2008*. [online] Pew Research Center. Available at: <<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/04/20/u-s-newsroom-employment-has-dropped-by-a-quarter-since-2008/>>

<sup>15</sup> WILLIAMS, A. (2017a). Measuring the Journalism Crisis: Developing New Approaches That Help the Public Connect to the Issue. *International Journal of Communication*, 11, pp.4731–4743.

integrity of democracy. This issue is high on the agenda of policymakers in Western countries because the safety of both democratic institutions and public safety is challenged. To take full advantage of the opportunities offered by digital platforms, many malignant actors, both private and foreign, have invaded the Western media ecosystem in a bid to influence the public debate by intruding into the talk on social media. They are weaponizing information to cultivate radicalization and advance extremist views, thereby provoking political polarization. Russian information warfare can be taken as the most salient example, heavily documented.<sup>16</sup> Manifesting the breaking “the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams,” Russian leader Vladimir Putin endorsed establishing the state-funded multimedia conglomerate for information operations abroad. This goal is defined in the very Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, delineating the critical role of the state-running mass media as a means of influencing audiences abroad.<sup>17</sup> The Kremlin’s channels for overseas audiences include RT television channels and the Sputnik News agency; together, they operate websites and social media, manufacturing newsfeeds in more than 30 languages. They routinely produce much of the controversial and fast-distributing, across digital platforms, materials that have recently come under scrutiny in many Western countries. The dubious content, including inaccurate reporting, conspiracy theories and the white supremacy narrative, is amplified incredibly quickly through social networks: the growing body of knowledge points out that humans, not algorithms, are the main culprits disseminating – deliberately or not – misleading information, especially when it comes to political news.<sup>18</sup>

The recent coronavirus crisis is another vivid example of how it works, as the emergency has given rise to conspiracy theories, both well-known and novel ones.<sup>19</sup> The outbreak of disinformation has revived severe political and social hostilities globally, with Asians finding themselves the target of racists attacks.

<sup>16</sup> EEAS (2018). *Action Plan against Disinformation*. [online] EEAS – European External Action Service – European Commission. Available at: <[https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/54866/action-plan-against-disinformation_en)>

<sup>17</sup> The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation (2016). *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation (approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016)*. [online] www.mid.ru. Available at: <[https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6B6BZ29/content/id/2542248)>

<sup>18</sup> VOSOUGHI, S., ROY, D. AND ARAL, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, [online] 359(6380), pp.1146–1151. Available at: <<http://science.sciencemag.org/content/359/6380/1146>>

<sup>19</sup> SEID, S. (2020). *McCaul Urges State Dept to Pursue Multilateral Investigation into CCP’s Coronavirus Coverup & Disinformation Campaign FULL TEXT U.S. House of Representatives Documents*. [online] Available at: <<https://gop-foreignaffairs.house.gov/press-release/mccaul-urges-state-dept-to-pursue-multilateral-investigation-into-ccps-coronavirus-coverup-disinformation-campaign/>>

As demonstrated in the special report of European External Action Service’s East StratCom Task Force, falsehoods and myths about the pandemic, in some cases conducted by state or state-sponsored actors, are fraught with “harmful consequences for public security, health and effective crisis communications.” The COVID-19 disaster is repeatedly presented as a weakness of democratic systems to deal with the crisis effectively.<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, misinformation and speculations about symptoms, unproven drugs and dubious therapy methods put lives at risk. To tackle the issue, the World Health Organization (WHO), authorized by the United Nations (UN) to coordinate emergency response to the novel coronavirus crisis, has designated a special section on its webpage to debunk myths about the pandemic, framing it as an “infodemic.” Nevertheless, health practitioners such as David Heymann, professor of infectious disease epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, emphasize that, incontestably, “the traditional media has a key role in providing evidence-based information to the general public, which will then hopefully be picked up on social media.”<sup>21</sup> Worthy of note, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo has listed Russia, China and Iran in his litany about foreign actors, promoting false information about the Western response to the COVID-19.<sup>22</sup> The EU, in turn, accused Russian media of unleashing a disinformation campaign and pushing fake news online in English, Spanish, Italian, German and French to aggravate the impact of the coronavirus against the West, generating panic and distrust – allegations, denied by the Kremlin.<sup>23</sup>

An additional aspect of this: external actors instrumentalize the freedom of expression and the press by operating within the Western media ecosystem without being constrained by the same professional and ethical norms that govern responsible news outlets in those countries where the press is free.<sup>24</sup> Relying on generous support funding from state coffers – for example, about 325 million

<sup>20</sup> EU vs Disinformation (2020). *Short Assessment of Narratives and Disinformation around the COVID-19/Coronavirus Pandemic*. [online] EU vs Disinformation. Available at: <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/eeas-special-report-update-2-22-april/>>

<sup>21</sup> ZAROCOSTAS, J. (2020). How to fight an infodemic. *The Lancet*, [online] 395(10225), p.676. Available at: <[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30461-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30461-X/fulltext)>

<sup>22</sup> United States Department of State. (2020). *Secretary Michael R. Pompeo Remarks to the Press*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-remarks-to-the-press-6/>>

<sup>23</sup> EMMOTT, R. (2020). Russia deploying coronavirus disinformation to sow panic in West, EU document says. *Reuters*. [online] 18 Mar. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-disinformation/russia-deploying-coronavirus-disinformation-to-sow-panic-in-west-eu-document-says-idUSKBN21518F>>

<sup>24</sup> Freedom House (2020). *Countries | Freedom House*. [online] freedomhouse.org. Available at: <<https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>>

euros for RT and 106 million euros for Sputnik budgeted for 2020.<sup>25</sup> They do not suffer the media's economic hardships, operating in the Western system, within which editorial independence is a predominant normative principle. As can be seen in the metrics, the coronavirus outbreak has led to the explosive growth of traffic to news sites, though it began to fade after the boom.<sup>26</sup> Still, commercials' sales and circulation all slumped following widespread business shutdowns caused by the pandemic.<sup>27</sup> Remarkably, digital giants such as Facebook and Google are expected to lose billions of advertising dollars in 2020 due to the crisis, for the first time in the history of these two tech sector leaders.<sup>28</sup> The news production has been hit by falling earnings far more sharply. The list of coronavirus-induced newsroom layoffs, furloughs and closures, is being updated continuously.<sup>29</sup> In the US, the pandemic, coupled with the previous economic recession, has wreaked havoc on the media industry, becoming "an extinction-level event."<sup>30</sup> In Canada, long before the COVID-19 emergency, even the largest newspapers were in desperate straits, with their equity plummeting after the revenue fell and was hit even harder by the pandemic, with thousands of workers being laid off and dozens of community newspapers closed.<sup>31</sup> The same picture can be seen across all European Union member states. For example, in

<sup>25</sup> EUvsDisinfo (2019). *Figure of the Week: 1.3 Billion*. [online] EU vs disinformation. Available at: <<https://euvsdisinfo.eu/figure-of-the-week-1-3-billion/>>

<sup>26</sup> BENTON, J. (2020). *How much danger does coronavirus pose to the battered U.S. news industry?* [online] Nieman Lab. <Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2020/03/how-much-danger-does-coronavirus-pose-to-the-battered-u-s-news-industry/>>

<sup>27</sup> The Economist (2020). The newspaper industry is taking a battering. *The Economist*. [online] 18 Apr. Available at: <<https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/04/18/the-newspaper-industry-is-taking-a-battering>>

<sup>28</sup> FISCHER, S. (2020). *Tech giants set to lose billions in ad revenue in virus shutdown*. [online] Axios. Available at: <https://www.axios.com/tech-giants-set-to-lose-billions-in-ad-revenue-in-virus-shutdown-f0e74396-6444-4c44-8aa7-974dd3e89883.html>; WAKABAYASHI, D., HSU, T. AND ISAAC, M. (2020). Even Google and Facebook May Face an Ad Slump. *The New York Times*. [online] 14 Apr. Available at: <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/14/technology/coronavirus-google-facebook-advertising.html>>

<sup>29</sup> Poynter. (2020). *Here are the newsroom layoffs, furloughs and closures caused by the coronavirus*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2020/here-are-the-newsroom-layoffs-furloughs-and-closures-caused-by-the-coronavirus/>>

<sup>30</sup> DERIENZO, M. (2017). *A recession, then a collapse*. [online] Nieman Lab. Available at: <<https://www.niemanlab.org/2017/12/a-recession-then-a-collapse>>; GABBATT, A. (2020). US newspapers face "extinction-level" crisis as Covid-19 hits hard. *The Guardian*. [online] 9 Apr. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/09/coronavirus-us-newspapers-im-pact>>

<sup>31</sup> BERNHARD, D. (2020). *Our media is on the brink of mass failure*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <<https://www.thestar.com/opinion/contributors/2020/03/27/our-media-is-on-the-brink-of-mass-failure.html>>; GALLANT, J. (2020). *Will Canada's media survive the pandemic? Fifty papers have closed in just the last six weeks*. [online] thestar.com. Available at: <<https://www.th>



Ireland, domestic media outlets were in a precarious financial position when the pandemic arrived. In the UK, newspapers' pre-pandemic straits were deepened by the print copies' sales decline and ad revenues drop during the lockdown, with "no title in Fleet Street unaffected."<sup>32</sup> It has long been an acute problem in Western democracies regarding community journalism, with repeated calls to policymaking action to develop public funding mechanisms ensuring a sustainable future for local news organizations.<sup>33</sup> The pandemic has only worsened the situation, having offered additional examples of the essentiality of journalism as an essential service. Despite extreme financial hardships, many news outlets have manifested themselves as a public asset by partially removing paywalls to give the public access to coronavirus coverage.<sup>34</sup> To sum up: all over the Western world, domestic media outlets had already been in a precarious financial position by the time of the pandemic.

### 3. Public subsidization of journalism: Habermas's recipes and the pandemic-induced practices

By all accounts, it is a perfect storm for the "Fourth Estate," and the media industry is pleading for rescue. Nevertheless, this financial Dunkirk has been a long time coming. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, widely ranked as one of the most influential social and

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estar.com/business/2020/05/06/will-canadas-media-survive-the-pandemic-fifty-papers-have-closed-in-just-the-last-six-weeks.html>

<sup>32</sup> MCMORROW, C. (2020). Covid-19 has caused a crisis in the media industry. *www.rte.ie*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.rte.ie/news/2020/04/11/1130008-covid-19-media-landscape/>>; RAJAN, A. (2020). How coronavirus infected publishing. *BBC News*. [online] 16 Apr. <Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-52299925>>

<sup>33</sup> RASMUS KLEIS, N. (2015). *Local Journalism: The Decline of Newspapers and the Rise of Digital Media*. I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd; HENDRICKSON, C. (2019). *Local journalism in crisis: Why America must revive its local newsrooms*. [online] Brookings. <Available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/research/local-journalism-in-crisis-why-america-must-revive-its-local-newsrooms/>>; Facebook Inc. (2020). *Facebook Journalism Project and EJC Launch European Journalism COVID-19 Support Fund*. [online] Facebook Journalism Project. Available at: <<https://www.facebook.com/journalismproject/programs/grants/coronavirus-european-news-support-fund>>

<sup>34</sup> SENNOTT, S.W., Charles (2020). *The Coronavirus Is Killing Local News*. [online] The Atlantic. Available at: <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/03/coronavirus-killing-local-news/608695/>>; SALTZ, H. (2020). *Removing paywalls on coronavirus coverage is noble. It also makes no sense*. [online] Poynter. Available at: <<https://www.poynter.org/business-work/2020/removing-paywalls-on-coronavirus-coverage-is-noble-it-also-makes-no-sense/>>; Financial Times (2020). *Coronavirus: free to read*. [online] [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/coronavirusfree>>

political thinkers alive, has long advocated taxpayers' subsidies for the quality independent press to save it as the mainstay of democratic discourse. A part of Habermas's concept of the public sphere, quality journalism has not lost its relevance and credibility. Meanwhile, the gradual erosion of advertising revenue-based funding leaves many public good-serving media agencies facing uncertainty about their future. Habermas accentuates that "no one has yet come up with a business model that would ensure the survival of the important national newspapers on the internet," and that statement has been remaining valid more than a decade after having been made. At the same time, no democratic administration can afford a market fiasco in this sector, "because listeners and viewers are not only consumers, i.e. market participants, but at the same time citizens...The quality press plays the role of "leading media" at least in the field of political communication – i.e. for readers as citizens," he argues (translated from German to English with [www.DeepL.com/Translator](http://www.DeepL.com/Translator)).<sup>35</sup>

Hence, Habermas defends the very notion of subsidizing quality press, although the means of supporting the press in public service can vary in terms of the funding model and may involve one-off subsidies, public participation, tax breaks, to name a few. There have been several models of publicly funded media, from the "Media Welfare State" in the Nordic democracies, the northernmost part of Europe to the BBC licence fee-based to various designs of state financing of national broadcasters in other Western countries.<sup>36</sup> In current circumstances, equal assistance from the government must be entitled to the private media, too, conditional on a particular outlet abiding by the highest ethical and professional standards and best practices governing responsible mass media in countries that enjoy the freedom of the press. Many of them are the startups that respond to the rising demand for specific and additional fact-checking formats amidst the spike in fake news and disinformation.<sup>37</sup>

The Habermasian view gains traction equally among scholars, professional associations and policymakers experimenting with toolkits amounting to, as it happens, the universal basic income (UBI) as a financial rescue for newsrooms. The concept of the UBI has been in the spotlight thanks to the pandemic that has reignited the debate over the welfare state as governments around the globe

<sup>35</sup> JEFFRIES, S. (2010). *A rare interview with Jürgen Habermas*. [online] [www.ft.com](http://www.ft.com). Available at: <<https://www.ft.com/content/eda3bcd8-5327-11df-813e-00144feab49a>>

<sup>36</sup> SYVERTSEN, T., MJØS, O.J., MOE, H. AND ENLI, G. S. (2014). *The Media Welfare State: Nordic Media in the Digital Era*. [online] *Project MUSE*. University of Michigan Press. Available at: <<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/36850>>

<sup>37</sup> SANCHEZ, M. (2020). *10 European startups fighting fake news and disinformation*. [online] EU-Startups. Available at: <<https://www.eu-startups.com/2020/03/10-european-startups-fighting-fake-news-and-disinformation/>>

were spending trillions to prevent economic collapse and stimulate recovery.<sup>38</sup> In multiple liberal countries, the industry lobbies have introduced proposals to keep the press afloat. In the UK, The National Union of Journalists has introduced a plan of action to save the industry, “essential” in keeping the governments in check.<sup>39</sup> The Magazine Publishers Association of New Zealand has petitioned the government for the national media industry to be classified as an “essential service.”<sup>40</sup>

The pandemic has moved governments in the West to act. The perception of journalism as a crucial element of critical infrastructure has gained acceptance on the administrative level, with governments of Ireland and the Canadian province of Quebec including news organizations in their lists of the entities providing an “essential service.” Canada’s federal government defines essential services as those daily practices essential to preserving life, health, public safety and basic societal functioning.<sup>41</sup> Australia and New Zealand allocated tens of millions of dollars for the ailing media industry relief, stressing the essential role of news service.<sup>42</sup> In doing so, the politicians accommodate the popular demand coming from an overwhelming part of their constituencies. For instance, members of the European Parliament have urged to rescue the media as a “pillar of democracy”

<sup>38</sup> The International Monetary Fund (2020). *Policy Responses to COVID19*. [online] IMF. Available at: <<https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19>>; WIGNARAJA, K. AND HORVATH, B. (2020). *Universal basic income is the answer to the inequalities exposed by COVID-19*. [online] World Economic Forum. Available at: <<https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/covid-19-universal-basic-income-social-inequality/>>

<sup>39</sup> NUJ (2020). *NUJ launches News Recovery Plan*. [online] National Union of Journalists. Available at: <<https://www.nuj.org.uk/news/nuj-launches-news-recovery-plan/>>

<sup>40</sup> EDMUNDS, S., ANUJA, A. AND COOKE, H. (2020). *Prime Minister “gutted” Bauer closing its doors, but says company refused wage subsidy*. [online] Stuff. Available at: <<https://www.stuff.co.nz/business/120754944/publisher-of-metro-womans-day-closes-in-nz-amid-coronavirus-woes?rm=m>>

<sup>41</sup> Government of Ireland (2020). *Gov.ie – List of essential service providers under new public health guidelines*. [online] www.gov.ie. Available at: <<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dfeb8f-list-of-essential-service-providers-under-new-public-health-guidelin/>>; Gouvernement du Québec (2020). *List of essential services and commercial activities COVID-19*. [online] www.qubec.ca. Available at: <<https://www.quebec.ca/en/health/health-issues/a-z/2019-coronavirus/essential-services-commercial-activities-covid19/#c48457>>; Public Safety Canada (2021). *Guidance on Essential Services and Functions in Canada During the COVID-19 Pandemic*. [online] www.publicsafety.gc.ca. Available at: <<https://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/ntnl-scrtr/crtcl-nfrstr/rctr/esf-sfe-en.aspx>>; FAAFOI, K. (2020). *Media support package delivers industry request for assistance*. [online] The Beehive. Available at: <<https://www.beehive.govt.nz/release/media-support-package-delivers-industry-request-assistance>>

<sup>42</sup> MEADE, A. (2020). *Dozens of Australian newspapers stop printing as coronavirus crisis hits advertising*. *The Guardian*. [online] 14 Apr. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/apr/14/dozens-of-australian-newspapers-stop-printing-as-coronavirus-crisis-hits-advertising>>

and a deterrent to the fake news and the “infodemic.”<sup>43</sup> This is a visible manifestation of the changes in the political atmosphere of the collective West that lends itself well to the implementation of a comprehensive plan to reform the funding model of the journalism system. By way of illustration: in Canada, most citizens support state funding to prevent failing news providers from closing down; nearly three-quarters of Canadians say social media platforms are less accurate than traditional media, according to the recent poll conducted by Nanos, a pollster, for Friends of Canadian Broadcasting, a non-governmental organization, operating in the field of journalism.<sup>44</sup>

It can be seen that the frantic search for a sustainable solution has proved to be largely fruitless so far while stimulating the debate about the mechanism of funding news enterprises. One year into the pandemic, Australia passed a world-first required social media platforms to pay for news content in an attempt to find a workable way to support journalists. Canada promised to follow suit by coordinating efforts with Canberra to get web giants to buy content, with France and other governments joining the push aimed to force Google, Facebook and other tech giants to pay for public interest journalism.<sup>45</sup> As shown above, the long-discussed concept of public subsidies that would protect the livelihood of the free press and thereby the health of democracy has been given additional evidence favouring the unavoidability of making the long overdue policy decisions.

## 4. Conclusion

The COVID-19 disaster has laid bare some intractable problems, including a paramount need to save journalism as an indispensable community facility in free societies amidst the unreliability of its business models – the course of

<sup>43</sup> A GROUP OF MEPS AND MEDIA POLICY EXPERTS AND LECLERCQ, C. (2020). *Health, trust and journalism: a Coronavirus Plan for the Media*. [online] [www.euractiv.com](http://www.euractiv.com). Available at: <<https://www.euractiv.com/section/digital/opinion/health-trust-and-journalism-a-coronavirus-plan-for-the-media/>>

<sup>44</sup> Nanos Research (2020). *Canadians say professional journalism is essential given the Coronavirus outbreak and should be supported by the Federal Government*. [online] Available at: <<https://friends.ca/workspace/uploads/documents/covid-media-emergency-fcb-nanos-report-2020-04-06.pdf>>

<sup>45</sup> Reuters (2021). *Canada, Australia agree to coordinate efforts to ensure web giants pay for news – statement*. [online] Reuters. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/business/media-telecom/canada-australia-agree-coordinate-efforts-ensure-web-giants-pay-news-statement-2021-02-23/>>; AP (2021). *Explainer: What’s up between Google, Facebook and Australia?* [online] AP News. Available at: <<https://apnews.com/article/google-facebook-australia-explained-55ce7a524855c2cdabdf8ca82ad2c8cd>>

action long suggested by many prominent scholars. The overwhelming empirical evidence from the Western governments' practical approaches to addressing the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the pandemic-caused complications that have highlighted the severe hardships the quality media suffering from for decades, all suggest that the journalistic services to the public must be treated on equal terms with other essential service industries – health care, safety, education, military et cetera. While remaining editorially independent, the news organizations must be funded by taxpayers, subject to the same machinery of the “universal basic income” distribution to citizens. Moreover, the privately funded media should also be entitled to the unconditional living stipend to ensure the functioning of the independent press, a fundamental component of a free society. Accountability mechanisms based on universal criteria to maintain the highest ethical and professional standards must be a condition of such a basic income guarantee. It has been shown that the pandemic has emphasized the role of a responsible democratic government in taking the lead in the redistribution of wealth for the public good and paved the way for a review of the funding model of journalism as an indispensable community facility in free societies.

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