

# Media Councils in the Digital Age

An inquiry into the practices of media self-regulatory bodies  
in the media landscape of today

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**Publisher:** vzw Vereniging van de Raad voor de Journalistiek

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This publication is produced with the financial support from the European Commission grant under DG Communications Networks, Content and Technology. The content of this publication does not reflect the official opinion of the European Union. Responsibility for the information and views expressed in the report lies entirely with the author and publisher.

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## Introduction

Over the years, journalism as a profession has developed its own guidelines of moral and ethical conduct. Codified in international charters like the 1954 *Bordeaux Declaration*, the 1971 *Munich declaration of the Duties and Rights of Journalists*, the 2019 *Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists*, as well as in national and even media outlet-specific Codes of Ethics, simple and abstract guidelines help journalists ensure that their reporting is fair and ethical. The simplicity of the guidelines is deliberate, as they should be applicable in the messy day-to-day practice of the journalistic trade. It would be impossible to specify rules that fit each and every possible situation, so the question ‘how should we report in this situation?’ is always a matter to decide for the journalist.

But what if someone disputes that the journalist made the right decision? What if they contend that they did not act in accordance with the spirit of the ethical guidelines? It is obvious that one cannot go to court for these matters. The main reason is that the ethical guidelines go *beyond* the law, they are more specific and demand more from journalists than merely ‘not violating the law’. For instance, while it is not unlawful for a journalist to present something that one knows to be false as truth, it is clearly unethical behaviour that undermines the very purpose of the journalistic profession. In other words, where the law is the outer boundary that defines what is and what is not allowed, journalists’ ethical guidelines narrow down what ‘ought to’ and ‘should not’ happen.

One might argue that in that case, these more stringent guidelines should become part of the law and be applicable by judges. However, this is problematic because of the nature of journalism itself. After all, in our society, journalism functions as one of the institutions that keeps check on powerful actors. Journalistic media follow governments, politicians, elites, and corporations, and report on their actions and wrongdoings. In the case that the ethical guidelines would be part of the law, the fact is that the legislators would be the ones defining the rules for the institution that is supposed to be its watchdog. In various countries around the world, we see how authoritarian regimes have instituted rules that make genuine journalistic reporting impossible, in an attempt at preventing inconvenient truths from becoming public knowledge.

At the same time, we know that misjudgements happen in the profession. Also, we know the enormous effects that media reporting can have – both on society, as well as on a personal level. Even if the reporting is factually accurate, the lives of people could be devastated when ethical guidelines are not respected (think of a report about a criminal that delves into their family history, thereby implicating people who may well have nothing to do with the criminal acts in question at all). There need to be ways in which the power of media can be held in check, without the legislative body being that power. It is within this context that we should regard the institution of the media council as a self-regulatory body for journalism.

At its core, a media council is a way for journalistic media to regulate journalistic conduct. It provides the opportunity for anyone (the public at large, from laypeople to celebrities and politicians, but also organisations like corporations, NGOs and governments) to lodge a complaint against a specific publication in the media when they feel that a journalist or editor has breached a deontological principle in that particular report. That complaint is then considered by a body of stakeholders, who will consider both sides of the argument, and decide whether, according to them, the moral guidelines of doing journalism were respected in the process. The difference between a legal court and a media council, obviously, lies in the fact that the latter cannot punish or sanction a misbehaving journalist or media outlet<sup>1</sup>. Its corrective power rests mostly on two principles: that of the expert review, and that of self-shaming. With ‘expert review’, we refer to the weight it has when well-respected individuals (peers at other media outlets, academics, lawyers, experts, or representatives of the public) arrive at the conclusion that one’s reporting was unethical. By ‘self-shaming’, we mean that media outlets

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<sup>1</sup> Though there are a few exceptions, as we will see later on

publish the media council's decision when one of their publications is judged to have violated the commonly accepted ethical standards. It is generally not possible to coerce media to publish this, which makes it all the more powerful when media *do* dedicate some precious bit of bandwidth (be it in print, in broadcast media, or online) to tell their own audience that they did something wrong. The efficacy of media councils rests on outlets and journalists cooperating with the procedures and respecting the councils' decisions.

The way in which these procedures work differs to a great extent between the different media councils in various regions. In the present study, for the first time, we made a comprehensive assessment of where these differences can be situated. To do so, we did 34 interviews with representatives of media councils and discussed topics like the complaint handling work of their organisation, their regulations, procedures, and codes of ethics, as well as their public engagement. As the title of this report suggests, we were particularly interested in what the proliferation of digital media means for the work that the media councils do.

We had two goals in mind with these interviews: one was to construct a comprehensive database to enable comparisons between media councils on a vast array of variables. This database can be found on the website of the Media Councils in the Digital Age project<sup>2</sup>. The second goal was the present report, in which we have selected a number of themes that media councils deal with, and that we thought deserve some more scrutiny.

This study is part of the Media Councils in the Digital Age project, implemented by the European Federation of Journalists, together with the *Raad voor de Journalistiek* and the *Conseil de Déontologique Journalistique*, both from Belgium, the Finnish *Julkisen Sanan Neuvosto*, the *Press Council of Ireland*, the Austrian *Presserat*, the German *Presserat*, Université Libre de Bruxelles (Belgium) and Fundació Blanquerna (Universitat Ramon Llull) (Spain).

It is co-funded by the European Commission, as part of its 'a Europe fit for the digital age' priority. The overall objective of this initiative is to ensure that press and media councils play a significant role in Europe in addressing the new challenges of the digital age. It supports the European model of media self-regulation as a major part of a general strategy to protect media freedom and encourage professionalism in journalistic content, while gaining a better understanding of the consequences and challenges of digital developments for press and media councils. In parallel, the projects supports the adaptation of media self-regulatory bodies to the online world and engage them in discussions with relevant international stakeholders to address new digital issues such as disinformation, misinformation and decreasing trust in traditional media.

### Some notes about terminology

In the next section, we will proceed to explain how we conducted our research, but it is important to make some clarifications about the terminology we use in the present report first, as this was one of the challenging aspects regarding this study. Although the core of what the surveyed organisations do is the same, and the parts that constitute the organisations are in essence alike, each uses different names and terms to refer to these same things. Not seldom are these names carefully chosen, historically shaped and nuanced, and did our informants insist on the importance of a certain term. However, in this report we need to abstract from these idiosyncrasies in order to maintain readability and be able to generalise our findings.

Therefore, throughout this report, we use the term **media council** to refer to the *organisations or entities* that we studied. This means the organisation as a whole, including the executive office (its day-to-day staff), the complaints-handling body, its board, and all other parts that the organisation may consist of. We should note that the term 'media council' is not completely accurate, since we also surveyed a number of ethical commissions that are embedded in other organisations. 'Media self-

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<sup>2</sup> See <https://presscouncils.eu>

regulatory organisations’ would be the most complete designation, but in order to maintain readability, we opted to use the shorter label.

Whenever we use the word **commission**, we are referring to the group of people who decide whether or not complaints should be upheld (i.e., the media breached the Ethical Code) or not. Dependent on the country, this could in practice be named something like ‘Press Council’ (Ireland), ‘Raad’ (in the Netherlands and in Flanders), ‘Senat’ (Austria), Pressens Faglige Utvalg (Norway), Žalbene Komisije (Bosnia and Herzegovina) or Mediernas Etiknämnd (Sweden). Again, for readability, we simply use ‘commission’.

Thus, **commission members** are the people who decide about complaints. This is not to be confused with **members of the media council**, a term that refers to the constituents of the organisation itself – the (umbrella organisations of) media companies, individual media outlets, journalist/editor’s associations or unions, and/or individual journalists. Here, too, the term is not completely accurate, since not all surveyed organisations have members in the strict sense (as some are foundations or NGOs). Again, for the sake of simplicity, we abstract from these idiosyncrasies and maintain the term ‘members of the media council’ throughout the document.

In some cases, media councils have a system in which a media outlet can voluntarily choose to submit to the media councils’ jurisdiction, without formally becoming member. Since this voluntary alignment does not come with the statutory benefits (such as the right to vote at the yearly assembly) nor the responsibilities (like paying an annual contribution) of membership, we do not label these voluntary associates as members of a media council.

For ease of reading, we have simplified the way we refer to the two media councils that exist in Belgium. The *Raad van de Journalistiek*, which deals with publications in the Dutch-speaking media in this country, is referred to as the ‘Flemish’ media council. The *Conseil de Déontologique Journalistique*, which deals with publications in both the French and German-speaking media in Belgium, is referred to as the ‘Wallonian’ media council.

Last, with regard to reporting **monetary values**, we use the Euro throughout this paper (values are converted from local currency where applicable, using mid July 2020 exchange rates).

## Method

### Scope of the study

The initial aim of our study was to survey the complete population of media councils from the 27 member states of the European Union, as well as from the seven (potential) candidate states for EU membership. For each country, we checked whether or not a media council exists, relying on search engine queries for media councils' websites, information informally gathered through the Alliance of Independent Press Councils of Europe network, as well as secondary sources (such as the Accountable Journalism Network<sup>3</sup> and the European Federation of Journalists<sup>4</sup>). In countries without a nation-wide media council, we made an effort to look for regional equivalents.

There are three defining properties that we looked for in order to determine whether an organisation constitutes a media council. One, they have to provide a service to the public to submit complaints about the content of media publications. Two, the organisation's complaint-handling work must deal with matters of ethics, not with laws and their application. Three, the organisation has to be self-regulatory in nature, meaning that their activities are organised and run by actors from the field of journalism itself. Although the government might contribute financially to their activities, it cannot have a hand in writing the ethical guidelines that media councils use, nor can they affect the decisions that media councils reach in response to complaints that are filed (including the selection of the people who make these decisions).

Applying these criteria, the total sample of media councils for this study amounts to 24, composed of 15 organisations from European Union member states, 4 from EU (potential) candidate member states, as well as from 5 non-EU states.

To expand our geographical reach, for countries for which we were unable to find a separate organisation that meets the aforementioned criteria, we looked if there was an ethical commission embedded within the local journalists' association or media association. This resulted in another four surveyed entities: two ethical commissions of journalists' associations from EU countries (Croatia and Slovenia), one from a non-EU country (Iceland), and one commission embedded within the news media association (Estonia). In sum, the total number of organisations surveyed is 28. (See the full list in Appendices A-C, from page 20 onwards.)

### Measured variables

To determine the set of variables that would allow us to provide an adequate overview of the practices of the organisations, we took inspiration from the methodologies of two previous research efforts that looked into the same topic<sup>5,6</sup>. We took their questions as a starting point, but adapted them in two ways. One, we simplified the measurement levels and/or wording of some questions in order to fit the wide scope of the present research. Both previous studies aimed to provide in-depth insight into a relatively limited number of regional organisations, hence the operationalisation and measurement was on a much finer-grained level than what we can attain here with an extended set of media councils to survey. Second, we added variables and questions that delve into the digital landscape specifically. Although the two previous research efforts did mention topics related to this in passing, these were not the focus of the reports. Therefore, we added questions that specifically deal with how the practices and organisational structures have been adapted to account for the changes over the last

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<sup>3</sup> See <https://accountablejournalism.org/>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://europeanjournalists.org/>

<sup>5</sup> UNESCO. (2015). *A needs assessment of the Media Councils in South East Europe*. <https://www.rcme-diafreedom.eu/Publications/Reports/A-needs-assessment-of-the-Media-Councils-in-South-East-Europe>

<sup>6</sup> Koene, D. C. (2008). *Raden voor de Journalistiek in West-Europa* (Studies voor het Stimuleringsfonds voor de Pers, Issue. Uitgeverij AMB. <https://www.svdj.nl/onderzoek/s21-raden-voor-de-journalistiek-in-west-europa/>

two decades, as well as the challenges that newer forms of media and technology pose to the classic accountability model that the media councils are based on.

### Data collection

To investigate the variables for each country, we relied on two methods. As a first step, we screened the websites of the respective self-regulatory bodies for the information that we were aiming to collect. For most countries, this already provided some information about aspects such as the complaint procedure, the structure of the organisation, and sometimes statistics regarding complaints as well.

Since not all variables could be retrieved from the respective websites, in a second step we reached out to all organisations and their representatives and tried to arrange an interview. We recruited our interviewees via e-mail, telephone, as well as via face-to-face conversations at conferences and gatherings about the topic of media self-regulation. In this way, we were able to plan and conduct 34 interviews about 28 organisations (in three cases, there was a follow-up interview with the same person, in three cases there was a follow-up interview with another informant, and two interviews were done with multiple representatives present). The interviews took place via telephone or video call (using either Skype, Facetime, WhatsApp, Viber, Google Meet, or Microsoft Teams). The researcher made notes during the conversations, and they were audio-recorded with permission of the interviewees to be able to verify information. A follow-up by e-mail was sent if any information was still missing.

The main reason that we opted for interviews instead of a written (online) questionnaire is that we wanted to ensure some flexibility. We did not have a pre-established exhaustive list of possible answers, and wanted to be able to account for answers unforeseen by us. In some cases, this led us to modify existing questions and categories, and in some cases we introduced new variables to be able to capture the answers that were given to us. Another reason is that some variables we measured are not straightforward, even for practitioners. Some variables were conceptualised differently in different regions. To help interpret and make sense of the question, it proved helpful that we were able to elaborate verbally. Moreover, talking to our informants gave us the opportunity to ask about the rationale behind the policies and practices.

### Analysis

The initial list of variables functioned as the basis for our data file (in spreadsheet format), which was adapted accordingly when questions were added, removed, or modified. This file functioned as framework that enabled us to process the data we gathered from the notes and recordings of the conversations.

We grouped the variables that we ended up with into six overarching themes:

1. Resources of media councils (staff and budget-related variables)
2. Maintaining independence (budget and organisation-related variables)
3. Scope and reach of media councils (how media councils delimit the content they will take complaints about)
4. Making it easy to complain (how media councils balance the ease to complain without overburdening themselves with complaints)
5. Checks and balances (which structures do media councils have in place to facilitate a fair complaints process)
6. Power and impact (to what extent do media councils succeed in positively contributing to the media sector and society at large)



Last, and in conclusion, we asked our interviewees about the future of the model of the media council. What challenges did they foresee for the media landscape that they function in, and to what extent can the media council protect against these problems? Or, alternatively, will the media council itself be dragged along with the stream?

Although these themes do not cover all of the variables that we measured, we feel that these do tap into some of the more prominent topics that media councils are dealing with today. For each theme, we describe patterns that we observed both in our database of variables, as well as the explanations that interviewees provided when answering our questions (which are not part of the database). In the following section, we describe these patterns.

## Findings

### Resources

In terms of resources, we asked about the budget that media councils had at their disposal in 2018 (and where the revenue came from), and we asked how many people these organisations were employing or working with. The first thing to note is that there are huge differences between organisations, which seem to be linked to the history as well as the maturity of the media system in that region.

In terms of staffing<sup>7</sup>, we can categorise the media councils in four rough levels. The best-staffed organisations have a considerable number of permanently-employed people (meaning at least four full-time equivalents), with multiple of them being involved in the complaint handling process. Their tasks could theoretically be shifted between different staff members with ease. This level of staffing is found in the Nordic countries, in Germany, in the UK, and in Québec. The next best, and most common, are media councils that have a small (sometimes minimal) yet stable staff, with the complaint-preparation work centred around one paid employee who might have some administrative support from a secretary employed on a part time basis.

Table 1. Media Councils' staff size and employment security

Large staff, secure	Small staff, secure	Paid staff, insecure	Volunteer work
Canada - Québec	Austria	Albania	Hungary
Denmark	Belgium - Flanders	Bosnia Herzegovina	
Finland	Belgium - Wallonia	Georgia	
Germany	Bulgaria	Kosovo	
Norway	Croatia	North Macedonia	
Sweden	Cyprus		
UK Impress	Estonia		To be decided
	Iceland		France
	Ireland		
	Luxemburg		
	The Netherlands		
	Slovakia		
	Slovenia		
	Switzerland		

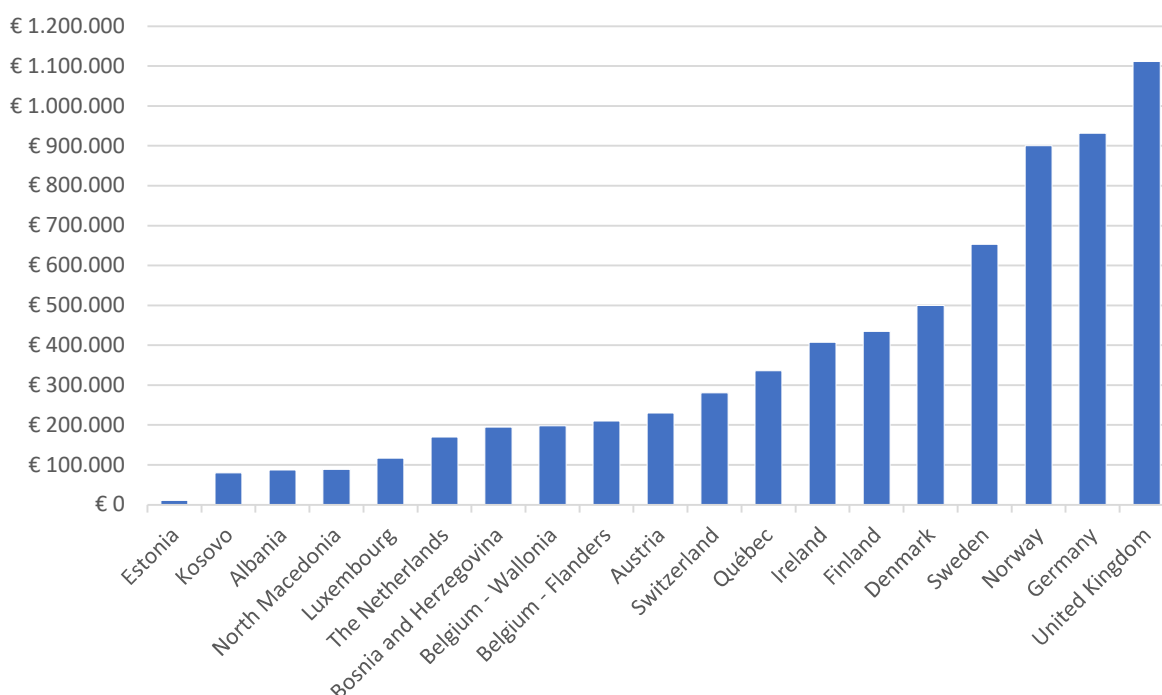
The other two levels of staffing are arguably less desirable. One group of media councils is able to maintain a group of paid employees, but their funding is insecure and dependent on project-based support from (international) donors. That funding is not intended for the structural operations of the media council, but it is earmarked for projects about specific topics, such as monitoring the prevalence of hate speech in the media. This entails that even if the number of employees may be comparatively high, the majority of their efforts go towards these specific projects, and they are only minimally involved in the work that is traditionally associated with what media councils do – handling complaints. Not only that, it also means that their positions are *de facto* temporary and their jobs disappear when the project money runs out.

One media council, that of Hungary, completely relies on the volunteering efforts of a small group of people, with them having to manage the organisation in their spare time alongside their regular day job as editor.

<sup>7</sup> 'Staffing' concerns the day-to-day activities, this does not refer to the people in the body that makes decisions about whether complaints are upheld or not.

In terms of budget, we see huge differences across the board. At the high end, we find media councils like those in Norway, in Germany, and in the UK, which have €900.000, €932.000, and €1.100.000 at their disposal, respectively. At the low end, we find organisations like in Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia, that have to do with a fraction of that amount (between €80.000 and €90.000)<sup>8</sup>. Of course, these are absolute amounts and these are not adjusted for the size of the media landscape (and audience) that media councils deal with, nor do they take into account the average wages in these respective territories. Nevertheless, they give a good idea of how well-funded the organisations are, comparatively.<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1. Media councils' annual budgets



In the middle, we find a group that has an annual budget of between €150.000 and €300.000 (The Netherlands, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Wallonia, Flanders, Austria and Switzerland). While this suffices to do the basic complaint-handling work, several interviewees from these regions indicated that a higher budget would help them to better fulfil the organisation's targets as this would, for instance, help them do a more thorough pre-analysis of complaints before they head to the decision-making body, put greater emphasis on (professional) mediation, use social media as 'first response' in media-ethical affairs, do more to create awareness of the media council, and educate the public about media ethics by organising conferences and workshops.

### Maintaining independence

As only one media council (the Flemish) reported to have generated an almost trivial amount of money by itself, we can conclude that all organisations rely on external funding for their activities, be it from

<sup>8</sup> To keep matters comparable, we are ignoring the budget of the Estonian media council here. Since that media council is embedded in the news media association, the fixed costs of maintaining the structure of an independent organisation are outside this budget, which is not the case for the media councils in Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia.

<sup>9</sup> We do not have figures for Bulgaria, Cyprus, Georgia, Hungary, and Slovakia. France's media council did not yet exist in 2018. The Croatian, Icelandic, and Slovenian media councils are part of the journalists' association and do not have their own budget as such.

media companies, state or regional government, and/or from NGO's and international organisations. How do they ensure that that funding does not come attached with some strings?

Regarding funding from media companies, there are different mechanisms in place to prevent interference from funders in the decision-making process. One such mechanism is that media outlets are oftentimes member via an umbrella organisation that unites different media, instead of being member directly. This can function as a buffer to prevent one particular media outlet from trying to shape complaint decisions in a certain way.

More importantly, most media councils have a two-tiered system, in which there is a separation between a board of the organisation on the one hand, and the executive office and decision-making body on the other. An organisational board is composed of representatives of the members of the organisation, representatives who act *on behalf of* those members. The board makes decisions about issues like the budget, staffing, and they are responsible for the long-term policy of the organisation (which often includes modifications to the Ethical Code). Whereas the people in this board act *on behalf of* the organisation that they represent, this is not true for the group of people who constitute the commission that evaluates journalistic conduct. Although they may be nominated by the very same organisations, they are required to make decisions with their own personal conscience. This is often mentioned explicitly in the regulations, like in the German Presserat's bylaws<sup>10</sup> that state that "the members of the commission are independent and not bound by instructions from the organisations who nominate them" (our translation).

Additionally, all media councils require commission members to recuse themselves in case they had anything to do with the article or production in question, in case they are currently affiliated with the media outlet about which a complaint has been made. Sometimes, they are even asked to recuse themselves when they have made any public statement about the content in question – like UK's Impress did in a case that related to a Brexit-themed publication, because one commission member indicated that they had posted something about that subject on their social media account in the past.

Regarding funding from government, we find that a minority of the media councils (eight in total) receive some support from their government, with sums ranging from €49.750 in Switzerland to €311.000 in Germany. There is much disagreement among the interviewees as to whether accepting government money is acceptable at all, given the specific nature of the journalistic profession. For representatives of some (North European) countries, this is undesirable as a matter of principle – one does not want to open themselves to a theoretical corrupting influence mechanism. After all, even if today's government is benevolent, the next one might not be. For some other countries, such as Hungary, Albania, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, accepting government money (if they would want to subsidise at all) is not even a question, as the corrupting influence that this would have is far less theoretical, but very real indeed.

When we asked how any state interference in the business of the media council is being prevented, the recurring answer was that this is something that is clearly understood by both parties. Three organisations (Austria, Flanders, and Wallonia) have a structural buffer mechanism in the form of indirect financing. That is, the funds that the government provides are transferred via a third party – the Journalists' Union for the two Belgian media councils, and the Telecommunications Authority for the Austrian media council. In some of the other regions where governments subsidise the media council (Finland, Germany, Luxemburg, Québec, and Switzerland), we see different forms of buffer mechanisms, such as a financing law in Germany that has to be renewed by Parliament every year, or funding is provided for specific purposes (Luxemburg, Québec, and Switzerland).

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<sup>10</sup> Satzung und Geschäftsordnung des Deutschen Presserats, §7 (2), retrieved from: [https://www.presserat.de/aufgaben-organisation.html?file=files/presserat/dokumente/download/Satzung\\_StandSep.2015\\_web.pdf](https://www.presserat.de/aufgaben-organisation.html?file=files/presserat/dokumente/download/Satzung_StandSep.2015_web.pdf)

Regarding funding from NGOs and international organisations, we see that this is relevant only for a select group of media councils in the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, and Kosovo) and Georgia<sup>11</sup>. For these organisations, funding comes from international NGOs that aim to promote democratic values, such as the National Endowment for Democracy, the Open Society Foundation, and Civil Rights Defenders, and from international organisations like the Council of Europe, UNESCO, UNICEF, USAID, and embassies of foreign countries. These organisations award grants, for which media councils can apply by writing project proposals. Although these entities (especially the NGOs) clearly have a certain ideological framework in mind, this in itself should not pose any difficulty in terms of independence for the receiving media councils, since the principle of media self-regulation is aligned with these values. Yet, the fact is that these media councils *fully* rely on this type of funding. Other potential sources of funding are ruled out, since the problematic nature of the respective media businesses in these countries (in terms of ownership and transparency) makes it hard or undesirable to get funding from these companies, and the precarious nature of the journalistic profession makes it difficult to get a substantial amount funding from practitioners' associations or unions. Hence, these media councils mainly look to international donors. However, the nature of project-based funding is such that the period is limited and the funding of different projects do not necessarily succeed each other seamlessly – so there are temporal gaps between projects during which there is no funding. This causes interruptions of the regular work flow (as staff may have to be laid off and rental agreements stopped) and uncertainty about the sustainability of the organisation as such. As a result, a lot of time is dedicated to searching for funding and writing project proposals. Not only the long-term sustainability is affected by the nature of this funding, we also see that the content of these media councils' work is. The grants that international donors provide do generally not go towards the day-to-day work of the organisation (complaints handling and such), but to projects with a specific aim. This means *extra* tasks (and overhead) for media councils, not necessarily a quality boost of their current activities. NGOs are looking to fund projects that yield tangible results within a comparatively short time span. This means that project topics that appeal more to these donors will have a higher likelihood of getting funded – even though these subjects may not be the most pressing themes, or indeed, be beneficial to the long-term sustainability for these media councils.

#### Scope of the media councils' work

A crucial issue for self-regulatory organisations is how they might demarcate what content they will deal with. Twenty years ago, this may well have been easier to determine (even though editorial content can sometimes be hard to separate from opinions). Today, however, especially with the prevalence of social media on which everyone can pose as a journalist, it has become increasingly difficult to draw these lines. We were able to identify four ways in which the surveyed organisations demarcate what content they will and will not deal with.

One, all organisations that we surveyed indicated that they will only take complaints about *journalistic* content into consideration. At the same time, none of these organisations have a definition of "journalism" as such. Some of the interviewees mentioned that their media council had been thinking of a definition that captured all of the relevant content while leaving out the content that they do not want to deal with, but could not come up with any. This was because on the one hand, some proposed definitions were too narrow, meaning that some editorial content would be incorrectly left out. On the other hand, some suggested definitions were too broad, making it unusable, as media councils would suddenly have found themselves having to deal with *any* social media content. This was undesirable for them, both because a broad definition would go against the basic premise of media councils (which is that they deal with *journalistic* content) and because of pragmatic considerations (the workload would be too high). To resolve the problem of deciding what is journalism and what is not, some

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<sup>11</sup> UK's Impress is also funded by an NGO, but the nature of the funding is different from the media councils discussed here – Impress has a long-term contractual agreement with the *Independent Press Regulation Trust*, which is not contingent on specific projects being carried out.

organisations have taken an indirect approach to define the concept (for example, the Finnish Council for Mass Media mentions that “[editorial content] concerns material that its editorially prepared, ordered, processed and selected for publication on journalistic principles or with journalistic emphasis”<sup>12</sup>), or take an “I know it when I see it” approach, in which the question whether or not some content is ‘journalism’ is decided on a case-by-case basis without using any pre-defined characteristics (like Hungary’s Editors’ Forum).

Two, another way to delineate is to restrict the media outlets that one can complain about to those media which have, at some point in their history, submitted themselves to the system of self-regulation. For media outlets, being a part of the self-regulatory system can either take the shape of formal membership of (or participation in) the media council, and in some cases (such as for the Danish, Slovakian, and Norwegian media councils) it is possible for media outlets to submit themselves to the ‘jurisdiction’ of the respective organisation without becoming a formal part of it. Seven media councils only allow complaints about those media that have submitted to the self-regulatory system in either way (this is the case for the Danish, Finnish, Irish, North Macedonian, Norwegian, Slovakian and British media councils). It seems that this active choice to submit to the self-regulatory system is positively associated with respecting the decisions – all these media councils report that their decisions are virtually always published. The other surveyed organisations will theoretically<sup>13</sup> take complaints about *any* media outlet, as long as it is written in a form that they recognise as being under their jurisdiction.

Three, regarding these media forms, we see that not all media councils cover all forms in which information is published. While complaints about traditional print media (newspapers and magazines), as well as their online equivalents are universally accepted, the question is more complicated for other media forms. Editorial content on television and radio might be excluded for historical reasons, as the local audio-visual regulator (the government agency that grants broadcast licenses) may be in charge of dealing with the ethics of their coverage. This extrapolates to the online realm as well. The fact that website content can be dealt with, does not always mean that *all* content on that website can be considered by media councils. In Kosovo, for instance, the media council only takes complaints about the textual information that is provided on these websites – audio-visual material (like an embedded video report, or a podcast about some news story) is the competence of another organisation. This may be a source of confusion for potential complainants.

Regarding social media content and user comments, media councils tend to take a cautious approach. They fear a flood stream of complaints if they would make use of lax definition of what they would allow as complaints. Hence, while complaints about the content that media outlets post on their own social media pages (on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram, for example) is almost universally accepted, the same does not go for what individual journalists write or produce. Some media councils decline to deal with that content as a rule, and for the media councils that would consider this type of content, they mentioned that they will only deal with these posts if they were produced in their function of journalist. Complaints about posts that were written in journalists’ role as private citizens are usually rejected. The difference, of course, is opaque. Again, since we already saw that a clear definition of ‘journalism’ was not in use anywhere, such calls are being made on a case-by-case basis. That being said, our interviewees did not report big problems in making these decisions – when there are complaints about journalists’ individual social media accounts, they tend to be from complainants who disagree with the journalist’s opinion that they voiced, a matter with which the media councils do not deal with anyway.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.jsn.fi/en/guidelines\\_for\\_journalists/](http://www.jsn.fi/en/guidelines_for_journalists/)

<sup>13</sup> In some cases, like in the Netherlands, complaints will be treated only if the media outlet in question cooperates with the process. Should they refuse to do so, this means that the complaint will generally not be considered substantively.

Regarding user comments, media councils have set even higher standards for these to be eligible to be complained about, as this is not considered editorial content. Six organisations (North Macedonia, Albania, Georgia, Estonia, Ireland and Slovenia) do not deal with user comments at all – neither on social media or on the media outlet’s website. In four cases (Croatia, Finland, Kosovo, and UK’s Impress), we see that media councils would not take complaints about user comments on social media pages of news outlets, whereas they will deal with complaints about user comments that are displayed on the media outlet’s own website. The reason is that media outlets have more control over which comments are displayed here than on social media. Especially when media outlets state that user comments are pre-moderated (when they are manually screened before they become visible), the contributions from the public are regarded as ‘letters to the editor’, hence, editorial content (or at least editorially-approved content).

When user comments on media outlet’s social media (on a newspaper’s Facebook page, for example) can be complained about, this usually relates to the *moderation* thereof. A user comment as such would not be considered, but when a complainant has asked the media outlet to remove a comment (perhaps because they were being harassed or falsely accused of something) and the media outlet refuses to do so, *that decision* can be complained about. After all, not removing it would be a sign of approval and therefore an editorial decision.

We have to note that the question of whether or not to accept complaints about user comments in any form is mainly a hypothetical matter. Receiving a complaint about user comments is rather exceptional for media councils.

Four, the last way of deciding what content (not) to accept complaints about is the requirement of a ‘personal stake’. To be eligible for treatment by the media council, can the complaint relate to *any* alleged breach of the Ethical Code, or should the content of the production in question be about the complainant in some way? For the majority (16 organisations) of the surveyed media councils, all media content can be complained about, regardless of whether it affects the complainant personally. One media council (UK’s Impress) allows complaints about anyone when it concerns accuracy, otherwise a personal stake is necessary. For the other 11, a personal stake is always required to be able to complain. What it means to have a ‘personal stake’ is always formulated in a very general way, like that some content has allegedly “harmed one’s interests”<sup>14</sup> (The Netherlands, our translation), that one is “personally affected by the article”<sup>15</sup> (Ireland), or that complainants “[cannot have] no cause of action in the matters against which a complaint has been lodged”<sup>16</sup> (Denmark). Given these broad definitions, the decision as to whether someone is indeed able to complain has to be made on a case-by-case basis.

### Making it easy to complain

Even though all media councils have certain formal specifications for making a complaint, they aim to facilitate complainants as much as possible to make these complaints. This low threshold can already be seen in the fact that submitting complaints is always free, and complainants do not have to fear any financial consequences. This obviously contrasts it with the legal system, which can be burdensome (in terms of time, resources, and financial liability) for people who feel aggrieved by media coverage.

Before making a complaint, all sampled media councils provide the possibility for potential complainants to contact the organisation in order to gather some information about the process and the formalities. The representatives will not provide any substantive judgment of the grievances, but they are able to tell the potential complainant whether or not this complaint falls within the scope of the council, which steps they should take, and whether all formal requirements are met. Such pre-inquiry is not necessary for complainants, however. In most cases, the information about the

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.rvdj.nl/procedure>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.presscouncil.ie/office-of-the-press-ombudsman-164/online-complaint-form>

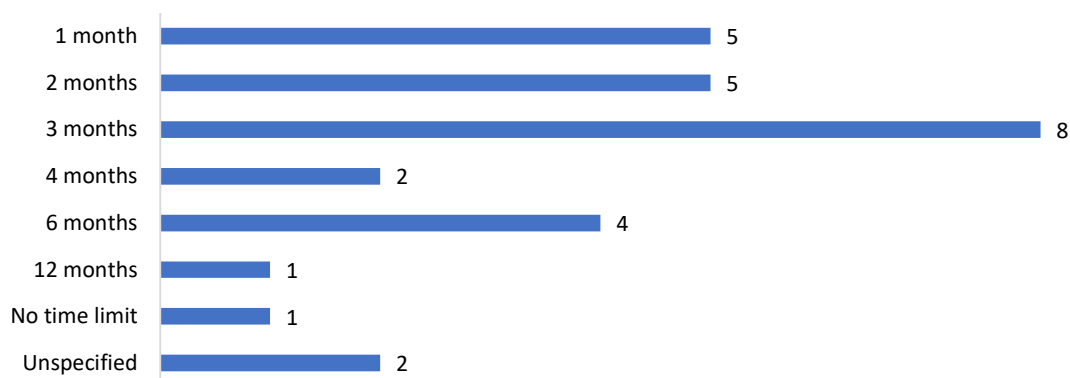
<sup>16</sup> <https://www.pressnaevnet.dk/media-liability-act/>

complaints procedure on the websites we looked at was fairly clear and straightforward, and many provide information in English for non-native speakers, too.

All media councils allow to complain via digital communication, either by sending an e-mail, or using the dedicated website form. There was some disagreement between interviewees about the usefulness of website forms. The organisations that have chosen to implement this possibility noted that this was useful for them, as they can clearly communicate what they would need to be able to start dealing with a complaint, and actually make it obligatory for people to fill in the requested information (otherwise they cannot press the 'send' button). The additional benefit is that it makes it easy for people to complain, as they don't have to bother themselves with writing a letter in a formal tone and think about style and the way in which a media council should be addressed (which might otherwise deter people from filing a complaint as they feel uncomfortable communicating with institutions). At the same time, the ease of use of a website form was used as an argument by some interviewees to *not* implement this on their website. They fear that it would make it *too* easy to complain, and that this would lead to an influx of complaints that may overburden them. Yet another viewpoint of media councils who have not implemented a website form was exactly the opposite – that it would make it *too difficult* to complain, as people might be technology illiterate and be intimidated by this.

Despite the attempts to make complaining easy, however, media councils obviously do need the complainants to meet certain (pragmatic) requirements to be able to do their job. The time limit is one important way of ensuring that the number of complaints to deal with for media councils remains reasonable. With the exception of Hungary, which does not set a temporal limit, media councils accept complaints from anywhere between one month (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Slovenia) and one year (Germany) after the relevant publication or journalistic behaviour in question. Deviations from this rule are generally accepted if the complainant can prove that they could not reasonably have been aware of the publication (for example, in case of incarceration).

Figure 2. Time restrictions for submitting a complaint



In addition, complaining anonymously is almost never accepted (except in Hungary, and in Austria when their commission explicitly agrees to it). It is possible that complainants' names will be anonymised in the publication(s) of the commission's decision (especially in matters relating to privacy and the right to be forgotten), but before their decision, media councils want to be able to be in touch with the complainant. Not accepting anonymous complaints is also a way to prevent frivolous complaints from being lodged – especially for media councils that do not require complainants to have a personal stake in the coverage.

Besides, the majority (seventeen) of our interviewees indicated that their media council has at least the formal possibility to mediate between the complainant and media outlet (the journalist, responsible editor, or editor-in-chief). A representative of the organisation may ask the complainant



what they would like to achieve with their complaint and/or suggest a solution to both parties (such as issuing a correction, anonymisation of the person in the publication, a retraction, an apology, or a follow-up interview). In such cases, the media council does not act as an arbiter of media ethics, but as a conflict resolver. For some of the organisations we surveyed, this is seen as a vital part of the procedure (like in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Flanders, Wallonia and Québec), while for others this is merely a theoretical possibility (like in Austria and Finland). Obviously, mediation between parties would not be possible if anonymous complaints would be accepted.

Another way that media councils try to manage their workload is to require potential complainants to communicate their grievances to the media outlet first. This has the additional effect of forcing complainants to enter into a discussion with the media. For eight of the media councils we surveyed, this is *always* the first step that one has to take, for another three of the organisations (the Austrian, Danish, and Finnish media councils) this is obligatory under some circumstances. The others, a majority of seventeen media councils, do not require it yet some strongly recommend people to try and get in touch with the media outlet first, as this can already resolve a significant number of issues that people might have with media coverage. (Especially when media outlets have their own Ombudsman.)

### Fairness, checks and balances

How do media councils prevent that one actor, one media group, or the media in general always have the advantage in complaints procedures? After all, self-regulation it is a system that is organised and run by actors from the media themselves. Media councils are very well aware of this issue, and know that their credibility rests on a fair process – both from the media's, as well as from the complainant's perspective. Media councils have a number of checks and balances to ensure that this is indeed the case.

One, the process of complaint handling (which is very similar across the board, with some variations on the same theme) offer ample opportunities for each party to make their case. After a complaint is received and is found to be eligible (meeting the formal requirements such as the deadline, and is within the media council's scope), the media council reaches out to the media outlet, journalist, or (responsible) editor-in-chief in question for their reply to the complaint – which may be followed up by further replies from both parties. Before the complaint is discussed in the complaints commission, an oral hearing of the parties may be organised to clarify some arguments or provide some extra factual information (however, most media councils' procedures are entirely written in nature), and some media councils do some form of fact-finding about the content of the production in question themselves. Thus, the way that the process is organised ensures that the commission has the opportunity to hear all relevant arguments from both sides, and that no points are left out of the equation. Our informants told us that even for media outlets that categorically refuse to cooperate with the complaints process, they will notify them and try to get them to cooperate. In some cases (like in Estonia and in the Netherlands), non-cooperation of the media outlet in question generally leads to a dismissal of the case, as to avoid a one-sided fight.

Two, the commission that decides on complaints does usually not (only) exist of practicing media actors, but includes outsiders – laypeople, academics, media experts, lawyers, judges, and representatives of civil society organisations – as well. In most cases these are chosen or vetted by the members of the media council, but they are supposed to act independently and provide an outsider's look at the complaints. For the 15 media councils that have a designated number of outsiders who look at a case, the outsiders-to-media actors ratio usually lies somewhere between 0.4 and 0.75, with the media councils from the Netherlands (1.0, or one outsider for each media actor) and Ireland (1.17) as outliers that have parity or higher. For the other 13 media councils, some (like Bosnia and Herzegovina and Bulgaria) do not have a fixed quote of outsiders, though they are included in the complaints commission, and some (such as Georgia, Germany, and Kosovo) do not include non-media actors at all. In three cases (UK's Impress, Slovakia, and Albania), active journalists are barred from the complaints commission altogether.

Three, a minority of media councils provide both parties the opportunity to appeal a decision if they feel that the outcome is not just. This is the case for media councils in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Hungary, Ireland, and Québec. Here, it is possible to get a second opinion about the decision from the commission or a separate commission instated for this purpose. Additionally, some other media councils (in Finland, Germany, Iceland, Slovenia, and the Netherlands) have mechanisms in place that allow the parties to formally make the case that the decision was based on factually incorrect grounds. For all the other media councils, the decisions are final – which is oftentimes inevitable as they are disseminated swiftly and, hence, not easily retractable.

When we look at the outcome of the decisions of the commissions (the groups of people who look at the substance of the complaints), we see that their judgments are almost as likely to be in favour of the complainant as in favour of the media. For the 22 media councils that were able to supply us complete data about the year 2018, we see that the commission sided with the complainant in 869 (or 47%) of the decisions, whereas the media were ‘acquitted’ in 987 (or 53%) decisions.<sup>17</sup> Looking at the individual media councils, we find that there is little spread between them, with half of the organisations’ proportion of upheld complaints sitting between 36 and 54 per cent<sup>18</sup>. These numbers suggest that although the decisions favoured the media slightly in 2018, commissions are not structurally biased towards one or another party.

### Power and impact

The power of media self-regulation rests on media actors’ *voluntary* acceptance of and compliance with the Ethical Code, their *voluntary* participation with the complaints procedures, and their *voluntary* publication of the media council’s decisions in a proper way<sup>19</sup>. None of this can be coerced. This is the paradox: the very freedom of the press that media councils strive for, allows media outlets to ignore the procedures of the media council and the opinions of the complaints commission.

Snubbing the media council, however, is generally not the attitude that we see. The media do normally cooperate with the complaints procedures, they value their opinions, and they publish the decisions of the complaints commissions when the Ethical Code was found to have been breached. Media outlets are usually asked to publish a (summary of a) decision when the commission rules that they have violated some ethical guideline, and most media councils (twenty) reported that media comply with this request either ‘often’ or even ‘always’. This is even the case for countries in which media outlets do not have to ‘opt in’ to the self-regulatory system for people to be able to complain about them (like in Flanders, Kosovo, Québec, and Wallonia). On the other hand, the impact of six other media councils’ decisions (those in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Georgia, and North Macedonia) is lower, as these are only published by the media either sometimes, or not at all. Besides, in some countries (like in Germany and Austria) there is the odd media outlet that refuses to publish decisions as a matter of principle – in their editors’ vision, this amounts to yielding editorial space to an outsider’s control, which they think goes against press freedom. Ironically, they *do* cooperate with the complaints process itself.

For most media councils, media’s ‘self-shaming’ by publishing decisions that are negative for them is the only tangible consequence that follows a breach of the Ethical Code. In two cases, there can be financial consequences as well: in Sweden, media outlets against which a complaint is upheld have to

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<sup>17</sup> Here we only look at the cases in which the commission reached a clear verdict (complaint upheld/not upheld), and ignore the cases that ended in another way (such as when the complaint was dismissed because the complainant stopped replying, a resolution was reached via mediation, or the procedure was stopped because one of the parties went to court).

<sup>18</sup> Median is 44, Quartile 1 is at 36 and Quartile 3 is 54 (the percentage of upheld complaints).

<sup>19</sup> Except in the case of UK’s Impress, which enters into a contractual agreement with media outlets that includes the ability to *sanction* apologies, corrections, and issue fines when the Ethical Code is found to have been breached

pay a 'handling fee' to the media council; in the UK, Impress may fine a media outlet for breaching the Ethical Code (up to 1% of the annual turnover).

Representativity is one of the key indicators of the system of self-regulation's power and impact. After all, the higher the proportion of media that have joined the media council, the more convincingly it can claim to speak on behalf of 'the press' as a whole. From our data, we conclude that the representativity is substantial in most of the regions we surveyed. Twenty-one media councils report that their membership (direct members or otherwise) represents the majority of the journalistic media in the region they cover. This is not the case in six other regions (Albania, France, Georgia, Hungary, Slovenia, and for UK's Impress), however. Even though each of these organisations have persuaded some influential media actors to join the organisation, their membership covers only a minority of their country's journalistic media.

When we asked the media councils' representatives what they thought the main ways were that one can see that their media council has power and impact, there were a few recurring answers. The first is the already-mentioned general acceptance and publication of the decisions by media. The second is that the media councils are regarded as authoritative institutions for the topic of ethics in the media. For the journalism sector, this means that journalists contact media councils for advice about concrete ethical dilemmas in their work, and that the media councils' Ethical Code and their complaints commission's jurisprudence are used as a basis for media outlets' own specific guidelines (which tend to be even stricter and more specific). For society at large, their authority can be seen in the fact that media councils' representatives are invited for tv and radio interviews, as well as academic occasions, and the fact that complaints commission's decisions may lead to public debate. In some countries, representatives have been invited as expert witnesses in legal trials, which is an indicator of their status in society.

The third way in which our interviewees said their media council has impact, is by raising the standards of reporting. Especially in countries where the level of journalism is already high, we hear that their commission's decisions can lead to more attention to specific topics like privacy (for instance, of crime victims and suspects), reporting about minors, and coverage of suicides. Via their jurisprudence, media councils are able to show what acceptable and ethical reporting would entail (and when it oversteps the line). Their decisions set an example for reporters and editors. Two of our interviewees were able to single out specific media outlets whose level of reporting used to be questionable, but that have significantly improved their quality since them joining the system of self-regulation.

## The future for the media councils

To conclude each interview, we asked our interviewees about their perception of the biggest challenges for both their media council and for the media landscape in which they operate. Obviously, the concerns for the media environment and the media councils are interwoven to a great extent.

The ideas, models, and structures of media councils as a form of self-regulation are largely based on assumptions that relate to the pre-digital situation in the media (even though 11 of the 28 surveyed media councils were formed after 2004). That is, the fundamental presuppositions are, first, that the business of journalism revolves around a core group of media outlets that are well-organised, both internally (organised in media companies) and externally (within publishers' associations). The second assumption is that media are trusted and *trustworthy* – meaning that they make an honest attempt at doing journalism, and do not have an agenda of spreading propaganda. The third unwritten assumption is that the media outlets run a profitable business by selling advertisements alongside their editorial content. Those fundamentals, as we now know, are shaky at best after twenty years of disruptive innovation caused by digitalisation.

Our informants sketch a picture in which the production of journalism has become less and less of a sustainable business model as audiences have moved online, to social media in particular, consuming media content on-the-go via mobile devices, yet are generally unwilling to pay for the content they consume via these media. Advertisement revenues for print and broadcast media have fallen, with online advertisement not being able to make up for the decline of income, as brokers like Google and Facebook take a big cut. Combined with the pressure of the instantaneous nature of today's news flow in which media scramble to produce content that 'draws eyeballs', this leaves fewer resources for doing the editorial legwork. This might jeopardise the respect for ethical standards. Even as the Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists<sup>20</sup> states that "the notion of urgency or immediacy in the dissemination of information shall not take precedence over the verification of facts, sources and/or the offer of a reply", the financial incentives to publish 'the scoop' may trump the ethical considerations. After all, ensuring that a production complies with the commonly-accepted moral norms takes more time, which may well mean that one loses the momentum to a competitor.

Although media councils did not notice any sign that these developments are slowing down, the financial situations of legacy media companies has not posed any problems for their monetary contributions to the self-regulatory system yet.<sup>21,22</sup> Particularly in the long term, however, it is not inconceivable that funding will be reduced as media companies' revenues continue to decline, and managers feel the need to make cuts in activities that they consider non-essential for operating a media business. For the media councils that are dependent on international donors for their activities, finances will remain a permanent headache for the foreseeable future. As explained above, their budget is a patchwork of project grants that may or may not be succeeded by new funding, which makes it hard to develop policies for the long-term future.

In terms of content, several media councils do note that it is not just the increased pace that potentially leads to ethical challenges, but also the blurring of boundaries between editorial content, opinion, entertainment, and advertising that results from media's attempts to appeal to a wider audience online. For example, 'native advertisement', meaning advertisement that is published in such a way that it is barely distinguishable from editorial content, is a concern in multiple countries. As media are

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.ifj.org/who/rules-and-policy/global-charter-of-ethics-for-journalists.html>

<sup>21</sup> One media council representative mentioned that one important donor is currently considering withdrawing their annual contribution, this does not seem to be related to financial concerns on their part.

<sup>22</sup> Here we should note that the interviews were conducted before or in the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, the financial implications of which were not clear at the time. Even at the time of writing, we cannot foresee the exact implications of the pandemic for media councils, but we know that at least one media council has faced reduced contributions from media companies as a result of their declined revenues.

looking for ways to monetise their brand value, the traditional rigid separation between editorial and advertisement space does not seem to be set in stone any longer.

On a structural/organisational level, we see that the shift towards the online sphere has proved to be problematic for many media councils. Although the first wave of digital native media outlets have become household names in the minds of the average media consumer, they tend to remain outsiders in the media landscape. Unlike legacy media forms (print media and their online counterparts, as well as broadcast media in many countries), digital native media are not included in the self-regulatory by default. That is, whereas legacy media outlets would be included by convention (because they are usually member of the news media association that participates in the media council) or by definition (because the media council claims 'jurisdiction' over any print or broadcast outlet), this is not the case for media outlets that started out online. Sometimes they cannot join the news media association that is part of the media council (because of formal requirements, like having to have a print edition), and in some cases they do not want to join (because their interests are misaligned with those of legacy media companies). Some media councils, like the ones in Denmark and Sweden, therefore give digital media outlets the possibility to submit to the self-regulatory system on a voluntary basis. Yet, it remains tedious for media councils to have to activate these outlets one-by-one. In the interest of media councils, as well as ethical journalism in general, it would be beneficial if digital-only media outlets establish umbrella organisations that represent that part of the media landscape. In the end, a lack of participation (and funding) in this field means that an (ever more) important part of the media landscape remains a blind spot. Regions like Flanders and Slovakia show that it is possible to create these organisations and integrate them in the system of self-regulation.

Obviously, these problems are still of a different nature than the issues that social media raise for media councils. Given the concerns about potentially receiving a torrent of complaints about Facebook and Twitter, the question remains what the optimal amount of effort into taking up complaints about content on these platforms should be. On the one hand, a major part of the audience encounters their news habitually on social media platforms, especially those people who do not consume journalistic content in legacy media forms. In the long term, ignoring these media may be unwise for media councils. On the other hand, there is a question whether there is much *real* journalism at all being done on these media. Often, these are merely hyperlinking to the main news websites. Moreover, as some councils already feel that they are being overwhelmed *without* treating complaints about social media (and with few prospects of receiving more resources), it is clear that not all editorial content on social media can be dealt with. Media councils should therefore contemplate pragmatic approaches to strike a balance between inclusiveness and feasibility.

Last, and perhaps most worrisome, are the efforts by political actors to regulate media, especially content published online and on social media in particular. Under the pretext of rooting out 'fake news', many countries have seen politicians (from different political alignments) seize the momentum created by the current political climate and introduce parliamentary bills or legislation that would hand governments or law enforcement new powers to intervene in what is being published online. However, even as the act of reporting 'fake news' is an immoral one, it is not within the realm of unlawfulness – and it should be left outside of it. It is a slippery slope when speech can be suppressed when it is deemed 'fake news', given that the term would have to be defined by political actors in order to become part of the law. As some of our interviewees noted, even though today's political actors may have the best of intentions, a future government might not be benevolent, and twist such legislation in a way that allows them to suppress any speech that does not suit them well.

Therefore, media councils should oppose any efforts to pass legislation of this nature, even those that seem to stem from genuine concern that citizens might be misinformed. It may be even more important for media councils, though, to be pro-active and consider what role they can play in ensuring that this void will not be filled by government regulation.

## Appendices

### Appendix A. European Union countries and media council status

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
Austria	Active	Österreichischer Presserat	<a href="https://www.presserat.at/">https://www.presserat.at/</a>	Alexander Warzilek (director)
Belgium – Flanders	Active	Raad voor de Journalistiek	<a href="https://www.rvdj.be/">https://www.rvdj.be/</a>	Pieter Knapen (secretary-general and Ombudsman)
Belgium – Wallonia	Active	Conseil de Déontologie Journalistique	<a href="https://lecdj.be/">https://lecdj.be/</a>	Muriel Hanot (secretary-general and Ombudsman)
Bulgaria	Active	Комисия за журналистическа етика (Komisija za žurnalističeska etika)	<a href="http://mediaethics-bg.org/">http://mediaethics-bg.org/</a>	Alexander Kashumov (commission member, former president)
Croatia	No separate media council, ethical commission embedded in journalists' association surveyed	Hrvatsko novinarsko društvo - Novinarsko vijeće časti	<a href="https://www.hnd.hr">https://www.hnd.hr</a>	Jerko Bakotin (commission member) Iva Borković (secretary) Đurđica Klacir (president)
Cyprus	Active	Epitropi Dimosiographikis Deontologias	<a href="http://www.cmcc.org.cy/">http://www.cmcc.org.cy/</a>	Katerina Nicolaou (secretary)
Czech Republic	No media council	-	-	-
Denmark	Active	Presse Naevnet	<a href="https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/">https://www.pressenaevnet.dk/</a>	Jens Kruse Mikkelsen (chair)
Estonia	Active	Pressinõukogu	<a href="https://meedialiit.ee/">https://meedialiit.ee/</a>	Maige Prööm (executive secretary) Tarmu Tammerk (former director)

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
Finland	Active	Julkisen Sanan Neuvosto	<a href="https://www.jsn.fi/">https://www.jsn.fi/</a>	Eero Hyvönen (chair) Sakari Ilkka (complaints officer)
France	Being founded	Conseil de déontologie journalistique et de médiation	<a href="https://cdjm.org">https://cdjm.org</a>	Pierre Ganz (commission member)
Germany	Active	Deutscher Presserat	<a href="http://www.presserat.info/">http://www.presserat.info/</a>	Manfred Protze (commission member) Sonja Volkmann-Schluck (PR officer)
Greece	No media council	-	-	-
Hungary	Active	Főszerkesztők Fóruma	<a href="http://foszerkesztokforum.a.org/">http://foszerkesztokforum.a.org/</a>	Balazs Weyer (chair)
Ireland	Active	Press council of Ireland and Office of the Press Ombudsman	<a href="https://www.presscouncil.ie/">https://www.presscouncil.ie/</a>	Peter Feeney (press Ombudsman)
Italy	No media council	-	-	-
Latvia	No media council	-	-	-
Lithuania	Inactive council	Visuomenės informavimo etikos asociacija	<a href="http://www.etikoskomisija.lt">http://www.etikoskomisija.lt</a>	-
Luxembourg	Active	Conseil de Presse Luxembourg	<a href="http://www.press.lu">http://www.press.lu</a>	Ines Kurschat (commission member)
Malta	Active	Istitut tal-Ġurnalisti Maltin	<a href="https://igm.org.mt/">https://igm.org.mt/</a>	-
The Netherlands	Active	Raad voor de Journalistiek	<a href="https://www.rvdj.nl/">https://www.rvdj.nl/</a>	Daphne Koene (secretary)

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
Poland	No media council	-	-	-
Portugal	No media council	-	-	-
Romania	No media council	-	-	-
Slovakia	Active	Tlačovo-digitálna rada Slovenskej republiky	<a href="https://trsr.sk/">https://trsr.sk/</a>	Alena Panikova (chair)
Slovenia	No separate media council, ethical commission embedded in journalists' association surveyed	Novinarsko častno razsodišče	<a href="https://razsodisce.org/">https://razsodisce.org/</a>	Špela Stare (secretary-general)
Spain – National	Inactive media council	La Comisión de Arbitraje, Quejas y Deontología del Periodismo	<a href="https://www.comisiondequejas.com/">https://www.comisiondequejas.com/</a>	-
Spain – Catalunya	Active	Fundació Consell de la Informació de Catalunya	<a href="https://fcic.periodistes.cat/">https://fcic.periodistes.cat/</a>	-
Sweden	Active	Allmänhetens Mediombudsman och Mediernas Etiknämnd	<a href="https://medieombudsmannen.se/">https://medieombudsmannen.se/</a>	Ola Sigvardsson (media Ombudsman)



## Appendix B. European Union candidate states and media council status

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
Albania	Active	Këshilli Shqiptar i Medias	<a href="https://kshm.al/">https://kshm.al/</a>	Koloreto Cukali (chair)
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Active	Vijece Za Stampu / Vijece Za Tisak	<a href="https://www.vzs.ba/">https://www.vzs.ba/</a>	Ljiljana Zurovac (former chair)
Kosovo	Active	Këshilli i Mediave të Shkruara të Kosovës	<a href="http://presscouncil-ks.org">http://presscouncil-ks.org</a>	Edona Fetoshi (project manager)
Montenegro	Active	Medijski savjet za samoregulaciju	<a href="http://www.medijskisavjet.me">http://www.medijskisavjet.me</a>	-
North Macedonia	Active	Здружение на новинарите на Македонија	<a href="https://znm.org.mk/">https://znm.org.mk/</a>	Marina Tuneva (executive director)
Serbia	Active	Savet za štampu	<a href="http://www.savetzastampu.rs/">http://www.savetzastampu.rs/</a>	-
Turkey	Active	Basın Konseyi	<a href="http://basinkonseyi.org.tr">http://basinkonseyi.org.tr</a>	-

## Appendix C. Non-EU countries surveyed

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
Canada – Québec	Active	Conseil de Presse du Québec	<a href="https://conseildepresse.qc.ca">https://conseildepresse.qc.ca</a>	Caroline Locher (secretary general)
Georgia	Active	საქართველოს ჟურნალისტური ეთიკის ქარტია (Georgian Charter of Journalist Ethics)	<a href="https://www.qartia.ge/">https://www.qartia.ge/</a>	Mariam Gogosashvili (executive director)
Iceland	No media council,	Siðanefnd	<a href="https://www.press.is/">https://www.press.is/</a>	Fridrik Thor Gudmundsson (commission member)

Country/region	Status	Name in native language	Website	Informant(s) spoken with
	journalist union surveyed			
Norway	Active	Pressens Faglige Utvalg	<a href="https://presse.no/">https://presse.no/</a>	Elin Floberghagen (secretary-general)
Switzerland	Active	Schweizer Presserat / Conseil Suisse de la Presse / Consiglio svizzero della stampa / Cussegl svizzer de la pressa	<a href="https://presserat.ch/">https://presserat.ch/</a>	Ursina Wey (head of media council)
United Kingdom	Active	Impress	<a href="https://www.impress.press">https://www.impress.press</a>	Ed Procter (chief executive officer) Lexie Kirkconnell-Kawana (head of regulation)