RENEW THE CODE OF ETHICS,

self-regulation, or what else?

Press Councils talk about

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

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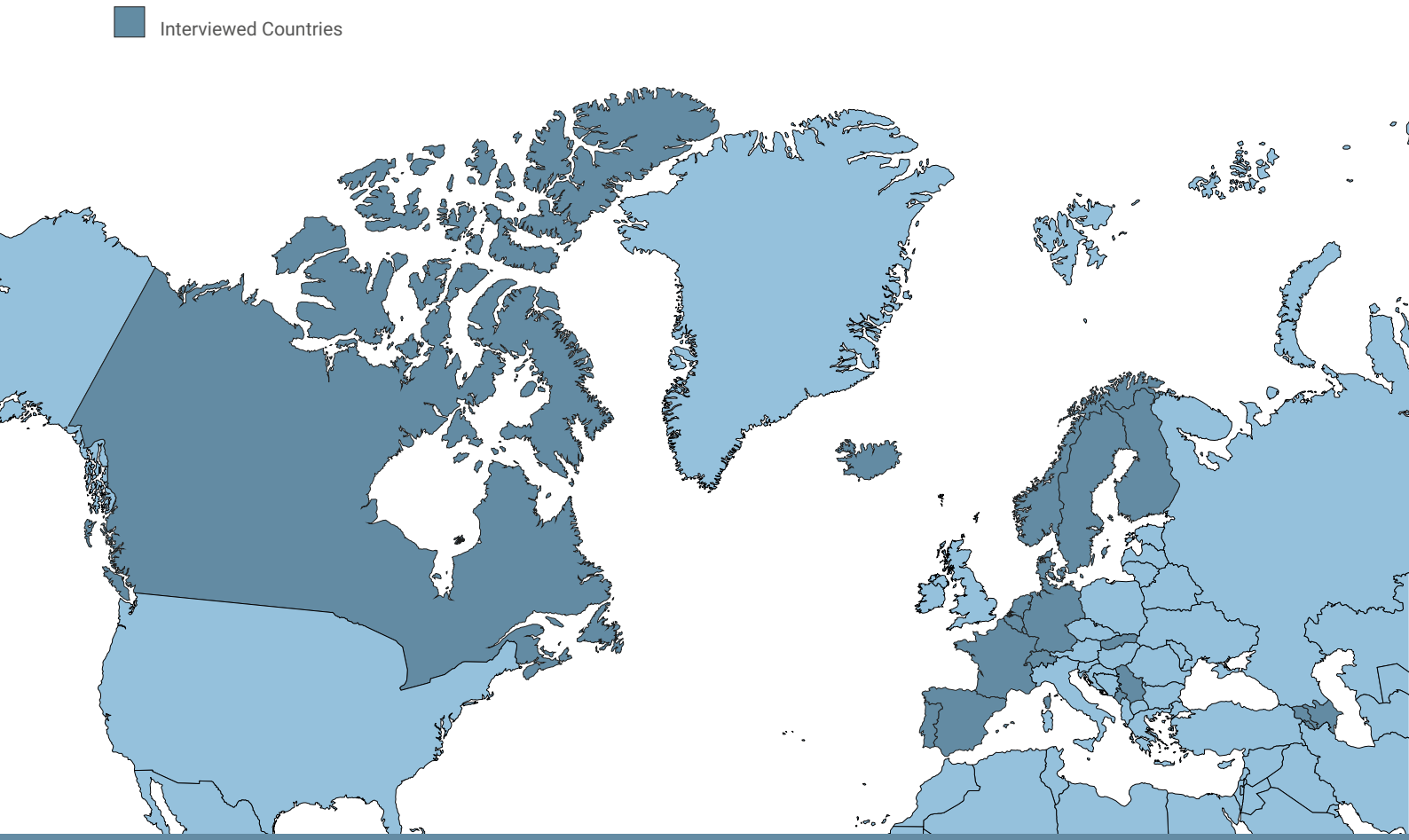
TECHNICAL DATA

For the completion of this research, 27 interviews were conducted with Press Councils from 20 European countries. Methodologically, semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out, addressing the majority of the questions while allowing room for spontaneous questions and responses based on the course of the conversation. Most of the interviews took place between February and May 2023, with an average duration ranging from 45 to 60 minutes.



Additionally, this report draw on previous related research before starting the interviews and used to structure the questionnaire:

Survey about self-regulation bodies and the challenges of the digital age (Masip et al. 2021): this report presents the results of a research project (Media Councils in the Digital Age #1 made by Blanquerna - Ramon Llull University) aimed to ask the opinion of journalists and other relevant stakeholders about how media councils could adapt to the challenges of the digital age. Based on the results of the study, journalists and members of media councils share a fairly similar view regarding the ethical challenges associated with digitalization. However, different viewpoints are identified in certain aspects that point to the need to encourage dialogue between the different stakeholders involved, between journalists and the media and between journalists and media councils, on the most controversial issues. A greater disparity in opinions exists in a number of areas, including the use of social networks for the expression of political and ideological views, the right to be forgotten and ethical responsibility associated with the use of user generated content, and the quality of comments on news articles. Additionally to fostering a dialogue around these issues, there is a need to promote a broader debate concerning what ethical principles should be adapted to the new digital reality. Clickbait and web analytics, as well as how they should be developed without diluting journalistic values and the public interest, raise ethical concerns. As part of the background of this debate, there is concern over the reasons why some journalists consider deontological codes to be inadequate in response to the challenges of digitalization (or are unaware of them).

Media Councils' codes of ethics and complementary guidelines activity (Media Councils in the Digital Age #2 made by the Belgian Flemish press council) (Harder, 2022). The value of this research work is very high since, despite the fact that the core values of journalism are similar across the European Union, their practical implementation varies from one context to another.

Digital challenges to ethical standards of journalism (Media Councils in the Digital Age #2 made by the Finnish Media Council) (Juntunen, 2022). This report examined the current and future need for the European media councils to revise their ethical standards in order to meet the challenges posed by the digital age. To summarize, most ethical issues identified in the report require only minor revisions rather than fundamental changes. It is important to note that there are some ethical undercurrents that may lead to more profound changes in journalism and its standards in the future. The issues include, among others, the growing power of algorithms, the blurring of lines between paid and editorial content, and the difficulty of distinguishing between private and public content in a digital environment. Moreover, journalism itself is subject to a greater demand for transparency than ever before. It is also possible that clashes of ethical cultures may result from the entry of new actors into the journalistic sphere and their possible participation in the system of journalistic self-regulation. It is generally believed by the participants of the study that the existing ethical codes and guidelines of their media councils are appropriate for their purpose as well as suitable for including all new forms of journalism regardless of the platform.

INTRODUCTION

Technology is just an instrument… under control?

This work is the result of a conversation focused on the present and near future with different representatives of Press Councils at the European level. Journalism, ethics, and technology are so intertwined that they lead to confusion about the boundaries that each of these concepts encompasses. Just as could happen in the current era of (mis)information, where entertainment, rumours, and media and political propaganda take the form of traditional journalism that no longer adheres to the same values or needs. This report takes a broader view that goes beyond the use of concepts such as technological determinism and invites a **deeper discussion about the role of technology in journalism** (Appelgren, 2023).

Discussing the use of technology, its **ethical implications**, and the **consequences** on the practice of journalism generates certain differences in the discourse applied by Press Councils. One main aspect that revolves around this conversation is undoubtedly the consideration of technology as an instrument and a tool. Thus, for many of the interviewees, the relevance does not lie in the new technologies or tools themselves, but in who uses them and how they do it.

"The main threat is that technology is kept as the hand of things. Making good progress that journalism is about humans speaking to other humans in order to help live together. And the technology could be the driver to forget it. Journalism is a watchdog of democracy. And I think technology's not a watchdog, so we must keep it in mind. Technology is useful but is a tool. And journalism is a human act."

Press Council 7

"I think we come back to the same as always. It's getting even easier to have sources for things that you cannot verify, and that you just take over like that. And it looks very professional. I mean, the grammar is correct, the punctuation is correct, etc. It also reads very probable, but basically, you haven't checked your sources. And we come down to very basic rules of journalism that have been established for a hundred years, that are being violated. And it gets so, so, so much easier to do that and just publish. You can increase the volume of stuff you publish, but you can't control the quality and finding the right mix and keeping the usage of these tools within the traditional frameworks of ethical codes of journalism is a challenge because it's so easy to just violate them."

Press Council 25

Thus, far from adopting an apocalyptic view, ethics appear as an intangible aspect of journalism that does not depend on technological advancement but on apparent common sense and prioritization in the actions of professionals in this sector who must fight to **preserve the nature of journalism itself**. In this sense, technological tools will only be useful on the condition that they do not determine the actions of journalists. In other words, this could be a debate as old as journalism itself and its role in democratic societies, so the conversation should not revolve around technology but rather journalism. Despite this, there is recognition that digitalization has brought with it the difficulty of continuing to apply ethical standards with the same rigour.

"No, it isn't. It's a tool like any other tool. So, for us, we have also taken into consideration if we should write a recommendation about it or not. But we considered that our code is enough for the moment because all the questions arising around news are in general, so you have to show you are a journalist, you cannot hide that you are a journalist, you have to mention your source, you have to check your information... So even if there will be one day, one complaint against a text, a content produced by an algorithm, the answer would be we are competent because most of our rules of procedure are saying that journalists or people are taking part in the release of information. So, it's more complicated, but it's not different from all the news producing. So, if we accept the question of being a real journalist, the most important risk I see is for the journalists or the media to forget about ethics when they are doing information with arguments. It's just the same when a journalist comes to use the first online information, sometimes they forget about ethical rules, for instance, rectification. When you are online, you forget that you have to rectify, to correct the information in a clear way to the public because it's so easy to erase or correct without saying it to anyone. So sometimes the media, the support, the tool, the technical element, make it so easy that you forget that you have ethical standards to follow. So, for me, it's the main risk to be pointed out."

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"I don't see it as a problem because it's a tool. It's a function to be used, but it's how it's used. And over and over again, I just don't think these tools are sophisticated enough to say that their intelligent design expresses itself beyond human input and human intervention. So, when I see how these tools function, like ChatGPT, for example, I don't see them as being really excellent data crunchers and that their outputs are fairly benign but that the input of the user is more important. So if you're deciding to say, I want you to write a story about the refugee crisis with this framing, with these sources, that to me is the more interesting element, and that's the human input that is at work there. It's not the responsibility of the technology and its output (...). If we genuinely think that there's harm that's taking place because of these tools, we should act in a proportionate way. But until someone shows me the harm, rather than this is new, I'm at the onset and it creates anxieties for me. (...) But as I said, the transparency question, which is one we do address, is one that I think is as old as journalism. I don't think it's a new question, and I think it's just to what extent we can provide good examples, good templates, good models for journalists about how they should be transparent, about how they're using these tools."

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However, this discourse does not overlook the necessary caution and even alarm about the future of journalistic practice in recent years. In this sense, despite framing this conversation within the framework of technology as just another tool, some interviewees do not forget the evident way in which some problems of journalism, such as the spread of fake news or attribution of false sources, have been enhanced. Furthermore, doing journalism also means being attentive, concerned, and protecting those basic rules that seem to be gradually dissolving for **a practice more associated with marketing**, as a set of techniques and studies focused on the commercialization of the product itself. Thus, technology would not adopt a neutral position as an instrument from the moment the independence of the journalistic profession is called into question.

"I think, in the end, it would be the fact that it is a very powerful tool that exacerbates the traditional ills of journalism. That is, I don't see a new kind of universe here. What I see is a technology that adds to what already exists and facilitates mechanisms for creating false content, attributing false sources. But well, this has already existed in journalism, right? Fake news was born with the media, so now what is clear is that it introduces infinitely greater power when it comes to doing this. (...) And there it is, as I think is the clearest example, that of Brexit. And how these new technologies allow for substantive influence in campaigns thanks to their strong power to aggregate and locate audiences based on criteria that hardly existed before."

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"We are not free of these techniques. Unfortunately, these techniques, these algorithms, all social media, everything is something which is leaving us behind, that we are just running behind those techniques as a tool for us. But this is not for everybody. (...) This means that many journalists are not independent from the social media alternatives or something like new technologies, new techniques..."

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1
NEW ETHICAL THREATS

In recent literature, there is an analysis of the perception that exists in the professional and academic sectors regarding the use of artificial intelligence in journalism (Calvo-Rubio et al., 2020). The results show a tendency to impose a discourse in which technology will not have a negative impact on the journalistic labour market. Furthermore, the authors explain the consensus on the need to invest in solid training for journalists in order to integrate the use of emerging technologies. However, in a short period of time, especially marked by the popularization of AI, the discourse not only returns to being central in journalistic practice but also in the ethical dilemmas it may raise.

This report does not aim to describe the uses that journalism or professionals in this sector can attribute to (digital) technology. This report serves as a discussion forum to address existing problems and establish the aspects that generate the greatest concern in European Press Councils. Likewise, given the conclusions that will be presented throughout this research, this work should not only raise questions about the future of journalism but also assist in the construction of a new or remodelled journalism. A journalism that is more responsible, transparent, and democratic. A journalism that is less subordinated to metrics, conflicts of interest, and the replacement of public interest with the interest of the public.

Although there is no consensus among the different Press Councils interviewed, certain discourses emerge that share certain issues to address. The aspects that have generated the most agreement or confrontation are as follows:

1.1. Non-stop journalism on an automatic basis

The association of journalism with technology and its possible consequences, whether positive or negative, leads us to consider one of the main aspects: the speed in the process of news production and publication. This consideration emerges as central after the interviewees responded affirmatively and emphatically to one of the questions: Do you consider that the speed or acceleration of information makes it difficult to verify the information and contributes to disinformation and polarization?

"Yes, we often deal with the fast-paced nature of news, particularly when working with developing and breaking news. While it doesn't necessarily change the ethics involved, it does place higher demands on making ethical decisions on the fly. In many news organizations, there is a need to decide quickly and make the right decisions rapidly. This can sometimes be challenging, especially when it comes to providing a timely response to serious allegations. The speed at which things develop requires prompt action. However, the time needed to respond is relative and varies from case to case. There can be differences in expectations between politicians or business leaders and the general public. These issues often spark interesting discussions within the board regarding the appropriate time required to answer serious questions."

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"I think with the technology and the development, it makes it more difficult that, for example, if one media brings something they haven't the sources or maybe they haven't asked critical questions, then that article can be published on different websites and social media. So, it could create a more vast and speedy process of sharing something that is incorrect. Whereas maybe 20 years ago, it would be like an article in a printed newspaper, and it wouldn't go so fast. But the media has, according to [our country] press, the rules. They have a responsibility to bring correct and fast information. But they must, of course, assess the information they give. And if they write something that can be harmful to a person or a company, they must admit to it to ask the person in question to get their comments. So, we have a couple of cases where the media hasn't given enough time to the person they want."

Press Council 5

The discourse surrounding technology and the speed of journalism reemerges as a determining factor, but there is also a sense of having it under control regarding its ability to influence journalistic ethics. Without making any excuses for being seduced by these practices, the difficulty of dealing with this landscape is evident.

"What we see is that when a complainant has a complaint about a publication online, where there is a factual mistake, sometimes the media outlet says, well, we had to publish it very quickly because of this and this. But in our decision, we state that although you had to publish it first, we will see whether there was really a rush for publication, and in our case, the rush for publication is not a good excuse to make factual errors or use the right of reply when it is necessary for the publication. So sometimes the speed of publications is involved in the arguments of the media outlet in our decisions, and we say it's not a good excuse."

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"Oh, yes. I mean, obviously, the rhythm of publication to be done in whatever media form has accelerated, and that's never good for traditional journalistic standards of double-checking your sources, not taking over what somebody else says, and putting things into the right context. So there are obviously challenges."

Press Council 25

In this naturalization of the rhythm that has taken hold of journalistic routine, two consequences emerge that go beyond journalism itself: polarization and disinformation (Masip et al., 2020).

"Regarding disinformation, certainly yes. It shouldn't be like this because journalism, even if it is digital and instantaneous, must respond to the verification or questioning of the facts the journalist narrates. But it is a risk that acceleration makes you fact-check after reporting the news. Polarization? Obviously, the mistakes and misinformation that this can produce can generate polarization, but I believe that the current polarization in society is not so much a result of journalistic errors as it is a political will to polarize."

Press Council 25

1.2. Bots, algorithms and IA

In recent years, a considerable number of reports and recommendations have been published regarding the use of AI in journalism. An example of this is the challenges and recommendations for incorporating journalistic ethical values into artificial intelligence, according to the Consell de la Informació de Catalunya. Among them, the use of automated content with editorial criteria, the coexistence of diversity and personalization for the health of the public sphere, the responsible handling of user data to preserve privacy, the supervision and quality of data to avoid biases, the human factor as a guarantee of quality, and the funding of platforms and journalistic independence stand out (Ventura, 2021).

"In the moment when there is an editorial decision to publish something or not based on an algorithm or a metric because, well, it's of interest and not based on the criteria of newsworthiness, then we definitely have an ethical problem. I insist and believe that this enters into a slippery slope. Indeed, the question would be whether it's a problem for journalism, and yes, it is a problem."

Press Council 14

The emergence of AI in our society has sparked both admiration and fear. It is easy to be carried away by the advantages of its use, as well as the enthusiasm generated by its innovation. The use of technology, specifically AI, has generated a conversation among experts about its favorable aspects, such as relieving workload, improving efficiency and speed in news generation, content personalization, and processing large amounts of data (García Avilés, 2019).

"Based on my understanding, algorithms don't always have to be interpreted in the light of a design you create for your own search. I believe algorithms should somehow serve to, as I said, streamline certain tasks. Bots, those that are generating information, seem important because we would have more criteria to know to what extent the information also includes a perspective that may have been crucial and has a different contrast and other insights besides just one."

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However, there are also voices that raise concerns not only about the use of AI but about its very existence.

"I think it's a problem [Artificial Intelligence]. It's a great problem for journalism, but not only for journalism. I think, of course, I'm not against new technologies, new inventions. Of course, we all understand that we have to move forward. Well, I have to invent something new which can be useful for people around the world. But artificial intelligence might be a mess for journalists. I think it will not be good for people because people will be selfless. We will lose our sensors. Everybody will look for computer telephony, mobile phones, smartphones, and they look for something. We need people-to-people contacts. We need to communicate between people, not with the machine, with any kind of smartphone or something like that. So, I think that this kind of techniques, technologies, innovations cannot make me happy."

Press Council 2

Thus, from the beginning of the interviews conducted in this research project, the discourse has varied, from those who initially did not see it as something imminent to those who conceive it as already part of the intricacies of journalism as we know it today. Or those who simply require new journalistic profiles responsible for managing its use in newsrooms:

"It's hard to say because it's evolving now. There are evident risks. But it's hard to say how it plays out in the long run. And of course, there's again, this question of transparency from the journalists' side, but also as a resource. As for finding out facts. There are risks that we haven't dealt with so far. When it comes to fact-finding, it becomes very complicated if you are not able to get to the original sources. And if you don't have the time to go to get to the original sources and you become the thrust, this kind of middle operates this artificial intelligence."

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"No. I mean, I believe that every serious news organization must adapt to the new technologies that are coming because otherwise they will probably die. So, what I mean, I'm not an expert, but I believe that A.I. is an interesting tool for the media companies. But it should be managed with some skepticism and managed by seriousness and, of course, be implemented under scrutiny from experienced editors and so on. So, when you use all these new tools, whether it's algorithms or robots or whatever it is, use it with your brain and with your trustworthiness as the base and don't let it go loose. Try to frame it within the editorial department as best as it can. I mean, that's a general answer. But I believe in using A.I. for journalists for sure. But you need to have an editor on top of it all."

Press Council 23

Furthermore, some interviewees, exceptionally, have even considered that content produced by robots is also subject to analysis by the Press Council. Thus, they do not make a distinction between journalists and robots. However, they hold media directors responsible for any ethical breaches that such robots may generate.

The main reason for this situation is the evident and relevant differentiation between countries, especially in those whose territorial, political, social, or cultural context does not invite (for the moment) reflection on an issue that they still consider does not directly affect them. It is something that belongs to the digital world of others (Ruiz, 2015), and therefore, it does not seem to generate the concern that would be expected when addressing the possible weakening of democracy through information capitalism (Han, 2022).

"I am sure that this is a bigger problem for others and for nations of millions. And I am sure it will start to be a problem to be dealt with here in [our country] bit by bit. But discussions haven't really started on this. And I know we will be going there and discussing it. And let's say that these questions are rather untimely for [our country]. (...) So it's something that comes from abroad, so to speak. And yes, we see discussions about algorithms and computer-produced news items. But it is not something that is made in [our country] or made by [our country] journalists or media outlets. It is something that is happening mostly abroad. And yes, it might be a problem in the near future in [our country]. And I suspect that it will be more heavily discussed in the coming years."

Press Council 8

Thus, there is a certain reconsideration of the limitations that the use of AI, especially, should have in journalism. The case of ChatGPT in Italy has been a recent and notable example in this regard. Italy has become the first Western country to block the advanced chatbot ChatGPT due to possible non-compliance with the General Data Protection Regulation (McCallum, 2023). However, it is also true that this country lifted the ban after OpenAI complied with the demands of the Italian regulator.

This context also coexists with the warning generated by the creators of this technology, its main investors, and thousands of academics regarding the extraordinary dangers posed by the advancement of AI (Pérez Colomé, 2023).

1.3. Metrics-driven

An equally important aspect that has emerged from the interviews with European Press Councils is the role played by metrics, especially those related to recommendation algorithms, in newsrooms. European quality media outlets are attempting to use personalized news to increase long-term audience loyalty (Bodó, 2019) and there is concern that journalism may be subordinated to the use of metrics. The gradual incorporation of algorithms and software capable of automatically generating natural language texts from structured data has been observed in newsrooms (Dörr, 2015). The latest report from the Digital News Report (2023) highlights how "the audience profiles for some outlets may have changed due to the shift from offline to online consumption. This is particularly important for outlets that reach more people through platforms like Facebook and Google, where processes like incidental exposure - and automated serendipity - render partisan selective exposure less significant."

The main discourse surrounding metrics revolves around the danger of recommendation algorithms. It is argued that the media industry prioritizes metrics over journalistic quality, favoring marketing strategies and benefits over the quality of journalism itself.

"Probably it's a problem for journalism in relation to the audience [recommendation algorithms], you know, but I think that the owners or the publishers are happy with it, you know, because for them, it's like the tool [that helps] how to make the marketing better and sell the information. I think that it can be a problem for the quality of journalism because if you are shaped or if you shape your articles or your work in line with what the audience wants, then it can be a problem because you should add something useful. You should bring something in. And in addition to better quality, not simply to follow what the people want or like."

Press Council 13

"I believe that those screens and counters that have been installed in the newsroom to see how many people view your news and how they rate it and how it ranks are harmful. I think they are harmful because they greatly disrupt the attitude with which the journalist approaches their information (...). I think those metrics, which are often quantity metrics, lead us to confuse something that I explained a lot to my economics students, that you shouldn't confuse size with volume or weight with size. Because there are small things that have great value and big things that are worthless. So, I think those metrics can be useful for understanding the market you are targeting. They can be useful for assessing the relevance and influence of what you do. But constantly being focused on whether I have more clicks or fewer clicks seems to me like a misguided path that leads us astray and trivializes the news. Because having a large audience does not necessarily mean having a good audience."

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However, there are also those who adopt a more neutral position, acknowledging the positive and negative aspects mentioned earlier but displaying a somewhat illusory attitude about controlling the consequences:

"I think there are negative and positive aspects in our opinion because on the one hand, if you are interested in certain subjects as an individual, even though you didn't use an algorithm, you will choose. For example, I want to read about the sports section. I don't want to read about the culture section. So you do that yourself. However, it can also narrow the individual's view on certain subjects so they would not get information about other very important subjects in society. So it could be very difficult that it would be so specific that you would not be able to change your view in some aspects or learn about other things. That is important."

Press Council 5

"Well, not necessarily. I do see ways in which these tools can facilitate and improve journalism, but there are also issues with how they are designed and how they determine credibility and functionality. So, while I don't think these tools will transform the journalism space yet, as they lack the sophistication and intelligence to create an existential concern for the role of human innovation, I believe their use by platforms that distribute information is more significant. The supply and distribution chain of journalism is corruptible and corrupted, and platforms are the main gateway for people accessing news online. Unfortunately, these platforms often do not consider how they promote, aggregate, and distribute news content, and new tools used for these purposes could further undermine people's trust in good, critical, and trustworthy content."

Press Council 21

1.4. Talking about social media (again)

Social networks, although not a central aspect in the topics discussed in this report, have emerged as a consequence, origin, or subcategory of various aspects associated with journalism, technology, and ethics. Thus, when addressing dilemmas such as self-regulation by the media and the role that certain mechanisms like algorithms can play in it, social networks have emerged as one of the evident problems in this context, as well as their role played in recent years.

"It is a problem currently. However, if we are speaking about a wide understanding of self-regulation, I think that social networks should also be obliged to have their own self-regulation rules, which include using mechanisms such as algorithms. And since they are very much special, they are very much based on technology, then their rules, of course, should be very much different from the rules that exist for the general media or information sphere. At the end, as you know, we have some steps in that direction, but we are very far from a perfect situation. Yeah. Because there is a conflict certain in the operation of administrations of social networks. Initially, they were created just as commercial projects or in most cases as commercial projects. But now the challenge is that they cannot remain just a commercial business, so certain rules that ensure respect of public interests should be enacted there. Including what kind of algorithms they put as a ground for their operation."

Press Council 1

In this sense, the aspect that has generated the most prominence and confusion among the interviewees is the difficulty in knowing what the limits are and who or how they should or should not be imposed:

"I'm not going to be apologetic. I'm going to say, since becoming chief executive, I now get three newspapers in print delivered to my home every day just so I can kind of maintain, and I kind of rotate them every so often. So, I kind of get a feel for what is happening in print. And absolutely, that affects my new diet. I see stories that I would not click on, and that's just a real thing (...). However, what I want to say is that algorithms are like any other tool, and they can be used positively to engage people to deepen their understanding of certain issues (...). That is not a bad thing. That is, I'm becoming much more informed about something that I'm interested in. And I don't think that's a threat to democracy. And it probably needs to be part of the business model that's going to enable journalism to carry on. Giving people what they want is generally considered to be a good thing. We need customers to pay, which journalism does. But then of course, it can be worrying. I mean, I'm not an expert on this, but my understanding is that kind of studies have slightly contested the idea that social media is a sort of a special echo chamber in the way that is sometimes being described and suggested that, in fact, it reflects people's polarization (...). But sure, you know, I think it's something we all need to be thinking about and worrying a bit about and in particular, thinking about the extremes and the responsibility of social media sites to be looking at the types of content that's being shared on their sites and kind of some extremism of various descriptions and what they do about that. But I would say that's not necessarily an issue with the algorithm serving up content that people are interested in, although that's clearly contributing to that. But it's primarily about the content, the nature of the continent itself, and whether that should be so freely available."

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Finally, all the divisions related to journalism and content on social networks have brought two main topics. On the one hand, the blending of information and opinion, as well as the sharing of spaces between journalists and citizens, anonymous individuals, or even bots that can shape public opinion.

And on the other hand, the responsibility that new communicative figures, who are not journalists, such as influencers, streamers, or YouTubers have or should have in shaping a responsible and conscious communicative space:

"It's the constitutional right that everyone has the right to inform and be informed. But those people (on social media) think they're informing. I think they're just giving their opinion. I believe Press Councils should be there to assess the practice and the professional conduct of professionals, those whom we consider journalism professionals. Now, what do we consider journalism professionals? That's the eternal question. I've been talking about this for 30 years. And we're still discussing it. That question, well, is that citizen a journalist? No, that citizen is not a journalist. Even though they may think that because they create content and share things, and because they are one of those influencers, as they are called now, and everyone starts a podcast, no, this is not journalism."

Press Council 14

"So I think the threats are coming from inside the house. I think there are continuing issues around ownership, governance, transparency, willingness to be regulated, willingness to be, and to listen to the needs of the public and respond accordingly outside of kind of commercial imperatives, sustainability imperatives. And that's not going to be solved by technology, but rather if journalists do not create a product of distinction online. If they don't create a credible product and demonstrate the benefit to society, the public will turn away even more than they have now and not see the value of journalism. And therefore, it will die, and that will be overwhelmed by the volumes of content that are available now online and by the public's own desire to create news in communities that are relevant to them, but outside of the construct of journalism (...)."

Press Council 21

"Well, that's a discussion in [our country] because they have been talking about building their own self-regulating system because influencers, for example, sometimes the trustworthy media are investigating some influencers and they have been lying or selling some makeup or doing bad things. And that's been a discussion. Maybe the alternative press should have their own ethical system, or maybe the influencer should have their own ethical self-criticism. I don't know. I mean, that's not my kind of expertise, but I believe in self-regulation when it comes to me. I think it's very hard to try to regulate the media. But I mean, I think it would be tough for them coming into the system that I'm watching over because then you have to be a media company and you

have to deal with serious journalism. But we are trying to get the new media in the system, it is free for them to join, and we are welcoming them in. If you are starting a new site where you are publishing news, we say welcome, joining the system is free for you. The winning you will have is that you can be scrutinized. Well, you can show your audience that you are open to being scrutinized and therefore you are a responsible person and ethical, responsible media company. So it's a commercial thing for you to say to your audience that 'hello, I'm freely joining the ethical system here. I'm taking responsibility. So read my news, my news sites because it's serious.' (...). So I think we have been educated through the years by being a critic against information on the Internet in general, at least in [our country]. And [our country] is a very enlightened society. We have a high rate of educated people and a high rate of people going to universities and so on. So I mean, it may not be the same in poorer countries where very few go to the universities and so on."

Press Council 23

1.5. What about democracy?

"I think democracy will survive if journalism and ethics in journalism survive. If we let it go, we lose democracy. These are great words, but I think that's the way to put the problem as a question on the table"

Press Council 7

All those topics we've previously seen, take on greater significance when connections are established with the future of democracy. According to the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) Report on reading comprehension, published in May at both the national and international levels, an alarming situation is highlighted in countries such as Spain, especially in Catalonia (IEA, 2023). Sweden, which ranks ninth in the same report, has decided to put a halt to its plan of digitizing classrooms, something that was supposed to accelerate in 2023. According to the Minister of Educa-

tion, Lotta Edholm, there are certain reservations about the benefits of screens in classrooms. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the "uncritical attitude that considers digitization as something positive, regardless of the content." Edholm argued that books have "advantages that any tablet can replace" (Expressen, 2022).

These recent examples serve as context for evaluating the measures taken in certain circumstances related to the evolution of technology and its future consequences on the development of democracy. Although this was not one of the questions directly addressed to the interviewed European Press Councils, the danger to democracy from different perspectives has repeatedly emerged. In this regard, the question that has generated the most responses has been the following: What are the main ethical threats of technology in journalism?

"Yes. I think it's a mental problem. Speed in journalism is a very important one. And I quote the International Federation of Journalism, Global Charter of Ethics for Journalists. It serves as a notion of urgency and immediacy in the dissemination of information shall not precede over as a verification of facts (...). It is very important to rest when you are a journalist. It's more important to publish the right information than to publish quick information. It is very important to take time. I think one of the main issues of democracy today is too much information and too quick information. Ask yourself this question: Who needs to have all information at all times? Even our president doesn't need to have all the information at all times. And I think that journalists should have this in mind when they are working. It's better to select information for the right people at the right moment. So, the acceleration is not only for journalism but for democracy, is a very high challenge."

Press Council 7

The loss of trust, not only in the media or government institutions but as a construct or result of an increasingly skeptical society, has been one of the topics that has emerged most clearly. Related to this, the complexity of creating a society open to debate, willing to listen to arguments that contradict their political ideology, and as a result, a declining democracy, has also been discussed:

"One of the threats is that people will encounter information that they can't judge whether it's reliable or not, and they're not available if they're not able to make any kind of judgments because this is the kind of work that the organization is now two states reaching hybrid warfare. Just want us to end up with, you know, nobody can trust anything anymore. There are those that's enough for them. They don't want to persuade us to believe them. That's enough that nobody can trust anyone anymore. (...) And I think that's the main risk that the. The ability to trust. Even if you think that the media is doing its job, is trying to there's enough goodwill in media outlets and they are trying to do it the best, you can't trust anymore that I think that's the biggest risk there is. (...) a huge danger for democracy."

Press Council 27

"It is important to embrace new technology without forgetting ethics. But I think that's for journalists. I think that algorithms can help journalists in some parts of the job. But I think that algorithms should not be the center of the work. Algorithms are only a tool, but there is a point I want to emphasize. It's that these algorithms are a problem for democracy, not for journalism. But journalism is part of democracy. It risks locking everyone even more into their own echo chamber of ideas and beliefs, and you know, there is no democracy without contradiction, without the construction of living together through debates. And the main risk of algorithms is about topics which are the daily work of journalism, to lock people into a homogeneous community. But it's not a problem only for us journalists, it's a problem for all people in a democracy."

Press Council 13

2
EUROPEAN CODE OF STANDARDS FOR INDEPENDENT FACT-CHECKING ORGANIZATIONS

In journalism, authority is based on a number of central concepts such as objectivity, verification, and distance/neutrality (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2007). In the new age of disinformation in which the authority of journalism is being questioned, fact-checking may serve as an antidote (Walter, et al., 2020). However, recent studies show that in highly polarized media systems, fact-checkers can only (with difficulty) combat the spread of misinformation effectively (Almenar et al. 2022). This is also related to the variety of existing fact-checking organizations, as well as their business model and the ideology that may be associated with their editorial line (Grave & Cherubini, 2016; Vizoso et al. 2019; Esteban-Navarro & Nogales-Bocio, 2021).

From the perspective of Press Councils, this report addresses the role of fact-checkers. As a first step, it was asked whether they considered fact-checkers to be journalists. Thus, the answers vary considerably, ranging from those who take it as a given, those who view it as a new subcategory or profile associated with journalism, or those who view it as a new profession unrelated to journalism. This variety also gains weight if we consider the difficulty of defining journalism itself in current times (Deuze, 2005).

"Yes, in principle, fact-checkers should be journalists and it sounds like there is nothing in the rules covering fact-checkers that contradicts rules governing journalists. I mean, rather than journalism being a larger field, maybe this is a subfield of journalism... And I think the thing that differentiates fact-checkers in the way I understand it, we understand it from other fields that could cover that, scientists or other professions, is that fact-checkers work for the general public. And their aim is that the work is comprehensible, is understandable by the general public and that is traditionally a journalist's work. So in that sense, I would consider them journalists."

Press Council 25

"The job is very close to journalism, but fact-checkers may not all of them be journalists. I mean, it's a journalist's job, it should be the daily journalism job. But sometimes people who are not journalists may fact-check a politician's jokes and may fact-check journalist publications. Why not? We have in [our country] an association which is a leftist association (...) It's not an independent fact-checking because it's an ideological fact-checking. But sometimes it's very interesting to see what they put out of the work of journalists."

Press Council 27

"It can be journalists, but I think it must be lawyers, mostly. Well, they can understand the rules and logic. Journalists sometimes cannot understand and follow the rules and logics. They work just according to some issues or something. But what about morals? We can partly understand the laws or know about it more. But professional lawyers, they know everything about fact-checking because lawyers also work in facts, they must not just read more or something like that, but let's just say that sometimes we journalists like to spread rumors as well. So, it would be better if the people with the little background dealing with journalism would deal with the issue of fact-checking."

Press Council 2

"For me, fact-checking when it is made by journalists is journalism. So sometimes fact-checkers are not journalists."

Press Council 26

2.1. EFCSN Code: A Comprehensive Framework for Fact-Checkers and Media Outlets

The Code of Ethics, Guidelines, and Standards for the Members of EFCSN has been attracting attention and prompting discussions among members of Press Councils. Some people are impressed while some view it negatively, highlighting its completeness, which confirms their viewpoint and rules positive requirement in terms of facts, but others have made a distinction between their task and fact-checking organizations. The content with high rigor and criteria, especially objective stance, receives appreciation though acknowledging some practical challenges. Yet, there is consensus on the importance of transparency in media, including funding sources.

Among the common reactions to the EFCSN code, one can note the difference in views expressed by different Press Council members. While some persons find the code a complete and valuable work created with good-enough skills, others were more negative and considered the strictness of the code as a potential hindrance. Interviewees state that it was notable that the code placed much focus on factual accuracy but at the same time stated that fact-checking needs to be differentiated from the role and responsibility of Press Councils. They also noted that although the criterion measured by the code might greatly apply to the latter (in place of fact-checker), it does not equate as a task for raising flags up above when battling inaccuracy at its sources.

> *"I went through it, but it seems to me that it's quite okay. You know, it's always very difficult to put everything into account, to take everything into account. And it's possible that some people will have additional questions or comments about it. And, I think the base is really okay, you know, because if the facts should be considered true and relevant, then there have to be some rules. And it seems that the material contains whatever can be expected to be there."*
>
> *Press Council 13*

"Well, I must say I've read this under the question or under the assumed role of the [our country] Press Council as a fact-checking organization, which I told you already, we do not consider ourselves a fact-checking organization. And the rules that you send me, these are very discerning and strict, and they make very clear what criteria are there for fact-checking organizations. And they also show that we do not fall under these criteria. There are some criteria which we also fulfill, but our job is a different one from what is outlined in these rules. I personally believe that it makes a lot of sense to have these rules. And I also believe that they are quite correct about the job that a fact-checking organization has to do."

Press Council 6

"The assessment I made upon first learning about the code is one of positive surprise, in the sense that it seems very complete, like a very elaborated work, the result of experience and also with a willingness for improvement, renewal, and with very specific deadlines. I think it might even be too demanding, too good to be true."

Press Council 19

In spite or because of disagreements, there is a consensus among the members of the Press Council regarding the importance and necessity of transparency in media, especially on the issue of funding sources. They understand that transparency is important for credibility and trustworthiness building. It is seen as a framework code used not only to set criteria for fact-checking organizations but also emphasizes on standards and ethics in the journalism field. Some members claim that they were convinced due to extensive collaboration and dialogue involving various organizations and stakeholders and hence depended upon adding credence and value to the code.

"I find it super interesting. Because it is necessary for organizations that fact-check information to have a code of standards, this type of standards. And I have no doubt about it, this code has been drafted with the participation and dialogue of, I believe, 40 organizations—academics, civil society groups, etc. Well, I think it's a very, very interesting and successful project based on what I have read and seen."

Press Council 14

Nevertheless, other members of the Press Council do not share this view. They see it as an affirmation of what is and substantive reiteration, perhaps at times varying with the norms in some aspects. As far as they are concerned, it is a commitment to renew standards already settled while occasionally introducing new innovations, mainly focusing on transparency. This particular member acknowledges the importance of the code but does not consider its significance as groundbreaking contributions.

> *"I think it's a compilation of what has been defining journalistic ethics. I don't see it making a special contribution. It's more of a commitment to renew what the three criteria are. They provide a methodology, some more or less ethical content regarding transparency. And I haven't seen any major innovations."*
>
> ***Press Council 17***

2.2.
Diverse Perspectives on Incorporating Transparency Requirements in the Code

The inclusion of transparency requirements in the EFCSN Code has generated varied opinions among members of Press Councils regarding its necessity and implementation. Some Press Councils have included transparency guidelines in their existing codes, while others navigate the complexities that emanate from overlapping jurisdictional or normative spheres between fact-checkers and Press Councils. Commonly debated aspects include the need for articulation between entities and standing in line with journalistic ethics. Likewise, the relevancy of addressing emerging ills, such as plagiarism and artificial intelligence, within the code is quite a conflation point.

"Yes, we have [the requirements to explain the algorithm to the audience]. So, in our code, we required that most recently. So, if you look on our website and our Standards Code and transparency requirement addresses this. So, we've seen examples of this kind of expression, and a lot of our publishers don't use these tools, but some do. And then also some national organisations use them as well. And we seem to see good examples of how this is described to readers. So, we have a broad audit trail responsibility requirement. We're not prescriptive about how that's formatted, how that's expressed, but we're starting to see good examples out there, which is encouraging."

Press Council 21

"As I said, as journalists, fact-checkers have to comply with the code of ethics and fall under the jurisdiction of the Press Council. Creating specific rules for fact-checkers can therefore be problematic (conflict of norms / conflict of competence). Nonetheless I can consider that some articulation between the two is possible if we consider the case where these fact-checkers rules are issued for a specific (journalistic) work: journalists who are members of the association abide by the rules of the association but remain subject - like the association - to journalistic ethics and to the Press Council. The only condition is that the standards issued by the association are in line with the principles of ethics (they can be more detailed, not go below them, not go against them). In this context, these association would have to validate the existence of existing Press Councils (or code of conduct) …"

Press Council 26

Concerning the contents of EFCSN Code, discussions have focused on addressing emerging issues within the field of fact-checking. Along with proposed additions of plagiarism and social media conduct as new standards to be included in the code, the need for including artificial intelligence (AI) remains a subject under contention amidst members. In particular, it is noted that while AI has not yet erupted sufficiently so as to become a big issue within countries, it may be sufficient enough cognitively by now since it's already emerged as a methodology of assisting production and reducing manpower involved within said technology to justify an urgent inclusion into the code. This would imply organizations and companies providing such services opting to self-regulate in order to practice transparency as well as ethical practices concerning their use of this processing power.

"The code of ethics is under review right now, and it will remain simple. From what I've seen of proposals and discussions, it will not include artificial intelligence, perhaps mainly because the issue hasn't arisen much in [our country] yet. Maybe it will in the future, but for now, the new additions mainly revolve around plagiarism and how to conduct oneself while using social media. But artificial intelligence obviously hasn't become a big issue over here. (...)".

Press Council 8

"In this case, it's more about self-regulation than ethics. It's about self-regulation by the organizations themselves or the companies that provide or apply these services. Yes, it's necessary to include."

Press Council 18

Among some members, there exists a shared understanding which clarifies that transparency requirements are constructive within the code. They state that transparency is implicitly embraced within principles of honesty and truthfulness, but since transparency is evident occasionally to readers, indicators and information on how news have been created should be provided by media outlets so that credibility can be enhanced and readers can acquire vital rumor with respect to production, sources of news.

"Yes, it would be advisable. In a way, it is implicit because when we talk about a media outlet, it can fall under the umbrella of honesty or truthfulness. That is to say, there are principles that could encompass this requirement. However, since sometimes the card is hidden, it would be convenient for media outlets. There should be a series of indicators that can be provided to inform the reader about how the news has been produced. I believe that is as important as the source itself because if you're saying that a certain source is being used, but that source itself comes from an algorithm or what algorithms do."

Press Council 17

2.3. Perspectives on Sanctions and Self-Regulation

2.3.1. Sanctions

Press Council members differ on whether sanctions should be used as a moralizing mechanism to enforce ethical standards. While some argue that penalties are essential, others strongly hold the opposing position against their position on sanctioning journalists' pen and voice by garnering campaigns of transparent deliberations among them and including public discussion as conventional means for influencing media decision makers. In other words, it appears as a strategic campaign rather than a sanction method that is expected to restrict freedom of the press. Consistent with the reputational consequences and trust inherent in media organizations found to violate established ethical rules, this perspective draws from the accumulated judgments of media users through public scrutiny aimed at establishing accountability without resorting to formalization of sanctions.

"So my idea, but maybe I'm alone in all the European countries. Well, my idea is that self-regulation is necessary in a first line to defend, protect journalism and information. But sometimes it may be not enough, and we have to take this into consideration and in this case, when self-regulation is not sufficient to stop some practices that are not democratic or that are causing damages, regulation may be necessary after. (...)"

Press Council 26

"When it comes to journalists, no. You know, we are very, very, very strict about this that in our guidelines and in our procedure, there are no sanctions. And we believe there should not be any sanctions."

Press Council 10

2.3.2. Self-regulation

In contrast, those supporting sanctions argue that self-regulation cannot always be relied on, again most importantly when certain practices simply continue despite voluntary adherence to codes of conduct. They state that intervention in regulation can be justified or necessary in specific moments when, for example, significant harm or serious violations may occur. There might still be some advantages in self-regulation while recognising that these tools are supplementary measures and may also bring some redressal situations where self-regulatory tools proved inadequate. In addition, it makes sense to include those Press Councils that feel satisfied with their self-regulatory system, arguing that both time (origins) and the commitment of all involved are the secret of this success.

"We believe that this does not go together very well with the role of voluntary self-regulation. We do not have any sanctions other than our decisions themselves in which we (that means a body of journalists and publishers) say that there was a breach of the Press Council. And if and for the intense breaches we have a sanction. We ask the publishers to publish our sanction in the newspaper or the magazine or the online medium which has published the article that the complaint was directed at. And so what we try to do is kind of convince the journalists and editors that our opinion is correct with regards to a certain complaint. And we try to enable a public discussion about breaches of the Press Code by publishing our decisions and by making the medium publish our decision. We believe that this discussion within the media and in civil society as well is the way to go. And sanctions like financial sanctions or something does not work for us." ***Press Council 6***

"The Ethics Committee here does not have any sanctions to speak of. So, this is the only sanctions, in fact, are just, you know, the reputation of the journalist or the media outlet where they are to be trusted. And that would only be in the mind of the media users. (...) In the main fact, I don't like the idea of throwing people out of the union or banning them from journalism or something like that. And in general, when that should or could happen is because of some breakage of law, some law breaking, really. And the penal system applies to that. And a serious offender, he just loses what is most valuable for him, to be trusted."

Press Council 8

To avoid any negative impact on the freedom of the press, self-regulation proponents do not believe it should be imposed by force. They advise that while they fully recognise and advocate for independent regulation, it must remain a voluntary system where media organizations can opt to become members; or find themselves deemed as excessed in terms of excessive regulation by lawmakers who may try to restrict press freedom.

"No, I don't. I believe in a system where it's free to join those. I'm for them. I like them. My work as a journalist earlier was very transparent that we are using these methods. We are saying we are very serious. We are using only serious science, the serious facts and so on. But I don't believe that they should be put in with force because that will threaten the freedom of the media to the press. I think it should be free for media companies to join them, that you shouldn't force too many things on the free media."

Press Council 23

Members articulate differences in views on the responsible measures to be taken by violations of ethical codes and statutes. Some Press Councils highlight the need for quick action resolving information disputes faster with less friction than legal proceedings can achieve. They discuss the imperative need to have codes of ethics, self-regulatory bodies, and public trust.

"Of course, the speed creates new problems. It provides more, let's say, possibilities, better serving the consumers interests. However, it also generates some challenges, and that is why any kind of self-regulation is very important because then the information dispute is resolved through self-regulation much, much faster than information disputes that go to the courts. So, I think code of ethics, some institutions that are implementing the function of self-regulation, also for fact-checkers, are very important now, and I would even say that a healthy information environment ecosystem cannot work without self-regulation given the speed which you mentioned."

Press Council 1

Other members cite an opposing view that although self-regulation is considered the primary step before ratifying or launching negotiations, sometimes legal sanctions may be necessary in cases where serious harm or violations have occurred. They recognize the complementary nature of such multifaceted actions, such as self-regulation and legal action, and point out that effective self-regulations from now on can potentially reduce the need for legal intervention. Therefore, they envision a condition in which self-regulation becomes credible and reduces the need for legal recourse, thus allowing for a well-functioning system of freedom.

"In order for ethical regulations to be effective, there need to be consequences. In our case, if a newspaper, TV station, or radio outlet breaches the ethical code and it is determined by the council, they are required to publish our statement to the public. This serves as a form of accountability, like a walk of shame, where they have to acknowledge their wrongdoing in front of their audience. When we reach a conclusion, they must publish it prominently, even on the front page, and expose their ethical breach to the public. This process is not legally connected to Norwegian laws; it operates independently from the government and legal system. The ethical codes we follow are self-regulating rules established within the press industry. We enjoy freedom from government intervention and the ethical codes operate separately from the legal framework."

Press Council 4

"I believe self-regulation is necessary, but perhaps it's not sufficient because sometimes the behaviour of professionals can reach a point that requires legal sanctions, as the harm may come from individuals who need to defend themselves when they are not listened to or when their concerns are ignored. I think these are complementary issues, and I believe that self-regulation is necessary, it would alleviate a lot, even the need for legal action if it functions effectively and has social authority. But I also think that there are times when someone's privacy is violated. I think it would be best if self-regulation gained enough credibility in the way things are done so that people see the legal recourse as a subsidiary and last resort, as a good functioning of freedoms."

Press Council 17

Some members also propose a multidimensional view, in which self-regulation acts alongside co-regulation and the rule of law. Therefore, they suggest that self-regulation is an essential step initiated to create awareness.

"What I have always understood is that self-regulation is one more contribution. So, it's a contribution that should be complemented by co-regulation and the law. Therefore, advocating for self-regulation doesn't exclude the other two approaches. However, in a way, self-regulation is a necessary first step, or if you prefer, a primary step, even before integrating into regulatory bodies. So, well, I believe it's a necessary step insofar as the actors involved should also become aware of it."

Press Council 18

In discussing these contrasting perspectives on sanctions, one begins to get a clear idea that Press Councils face difficult decisions while formulating an ethical framework for media organizations. How much should this accountability overload? Finding a healthy equilibrium between accountability and press liberty will require cautious deliberations about pressing ethical issues posed by a media landscape that continues to promote transparency and rigorous fact-checking but always with insecurity and skepticism. EFCSN Code ends up being a platform for further discussions and reflections on appropriate strategy to uphold ethical standards, transparent practices, and safeguard integrity of outlets themselves.

3
UNVEILING THE GAP: PERCEPTIONS AND MISCONCEPTIONS OF PRESS COUNCILS

Press Councils, mandated with upholding ethical standards and enhancing responsible journalism, play a vital role in the media landscape. However, observed across countries are stark differences in visibility and appreciation accorded to these councils. While some Press Councils benefit from their affiliation with prominent media organizations, others struggle to be recognized, even more for those recently established. This section sheds light on perceptions and misconceptions of Press Councils that would explain their stumbling blocks in awareness and respect among journalists and media organizations. It will also explore and discuss the need for improved engagement with journalists whereby they lack knowledge regarding support as well as contributions they can offer to Press Councils. When understood, we understand gaps in understanding and appreciation of council roles among other things.

In terms of effectiveness, there are varying levels of how Press Councils work to help restore public confidence in the media and their practices. Some were in a collaboration with the outlets and journalists while others had strategies and plans that they were implementing for better impact from the Press Councils to the benefit of the outlets' business. However, there is still room for improvement, especially when it comes to directly approaching the journalists to enhance relevance for the Councils.

> *"I think [our Press Council] absolutely has more to do. Recently we published a strategy for the next five years and a lot of that is about improving our kind of direct intervention with journalists to kind of make sure that we are being as relevant as we can be to help them. There are reputational, commercial, regulatory, and legal incentives for journalists to do their jobs better. They want to improve, and we want to help them. However, I am unsure of their awareness of the ways we can assist and the value we provide. We need to do better. We have seen progress as journalists seek our regulation and new publishers join. This is a positive sign, but there is much more to do to build relevance and engagement with journalists."*
>
> ***Press Council 22***

"Mostly, they don't know it, and as a result of not knowing it, they cannot respect it. There are already journalists who know it, but mostly we are still struggling for journalists to know and, therefore, respect the Press Council and the code of ethics. (...) Media outlets do know about the Council and the code of ethics, but they try to pretend they don't, especially when the resolutions are unfavorable to them. But they do know it. As long as they are serious media outlets, they know it and respect it. However, there is a significant number of media outlets that know it but pretend they don't."

Press Council 15

It's clearly seen that most of the journalists and media outlets are unaware of the Press Councils, their principles and effectiveness. In addition, there is a lack of knowledge about how to approach Press Councils. Two major concerns are observed in the interviews. Journalists and media outlets don't know the Press Councils' contributions and support that they can provide. But at the same time both journalists and media outlets respect Press Councils only when it affects themselves in some circumstances, because they generally see Press Councils as instruments that cause inconvenience rather than as entities that provide assistance.

"They (journalists) neither know nor expect nor respect them, among other things because they don't know them. (...) I believe that they (media outlets) have become aware of them at some point. They only respect them when it affects them directly. It is true that when a criticism, complaint, or claim is directed at one of the major media outlets, or generally at media with a certain level, it is noticeable that the director or their legal team, their legal advisors, usually respond and provide evidence. In that sense, there is respect for the work of the Council and the task it performs. However, what I don't see is that prior commitment. I mean, it is a commitment when the complaint affects them directly. But I don't see the prior commitment to promote, support, or finance the Press Council itself."

Press Council 18

"The majority (of journalists) don't know what a Press Council is. They don't know how it functions. But everything gets confused as well. They don't know what we are doing, they don't really know what we can contribute, they don't know how to approach us, they don't know how to file a complaint. Many times, they don't know when their rights as journalists are being violated.(...) I believe that when a Press Council intervenes or provides advice to media outlets, they listen, they are concerned about responding, they are concerned about giving explanations. And once the resolution comes out and maybe it doesn't rule in their favor, that's when they discredit it."

Press Council 14

"I believe that journalists, in general, don't have a clear idea about Press Councils and see them as some kind of instrument that seems to be there to bother them, but not to help them. (...) In theory, they should go hand in hand, and because journalists are not supposed to see the ethics commissions as some kind of overseer of nothing, but rather as a guarantor of something that they administer and that has value. That's one aspect, and then there are the media outlets. I think the media outlets are not comfortable with the Press Council in general. It's not so convenient because they operate in the dual business dynamic."

Press Council 17

4
KEY POINTS

Technology appears as a tool or element that serves primarily to exacerbate the traditional ills associated with journalism. Therefore, technology, per se, does not imply an instrument that will automatically result in practices that will lead to the degradation of journalism. However, journalists or media outlets themselves use technology to do less and less journalism as time goes on. The process can be conscious, subordinated to metrics and marketing strategies, or unconsciously, where ethics are relegated to the background or forgotten altogether.

In spite of technological advances, digitization, and concerns regarding information disorders, both in traditional media and on the Internet, most interviewees responded according to the obvious differences between each media ecosystem, as described by Chadwick in his Hybrid Media System (2017). Accordingly, it is shown that the concern for the role of current technology, or the one that is about to be consolidated as AI, is based upon national interests or conflicts.

Overall, the reaction towards the EFCSN code is positive and it has been generally acknowledged as an elaborate and inclusive one which appears valuable to organisations involved in fact-checking activities. It receives a perspective of being very useful in framing criteria and guidelines clear enough for any organisation to act on them. Finally, some perspectives have perceived this code as more like a compilation of journalistic ethics rather than actually groundbreaking, emphasising the importance in touting transparency with regard to funding media products highlighted by EFCSN.

For the issue of whether Press Councils should incorporate specific regulations specifically addressing fact-checkers, there are certainly different perspectives. Certainly, based on arguments coming from their component parts, there is no reason why fact-checkers shouldn't fall within the existing code of ethics and jurisdiction of Press Councils; possible articulation between the two, ensuring association standards ali-

gn with ethical principles. On the other hand, probably recognizing that particular rules for fact-checkers need be incorporated within the code, highlighting the important self-regulation in those services, expressing how necessary it is to inform readers about the production process especially in cases involving algorithms or artificial intelligence.

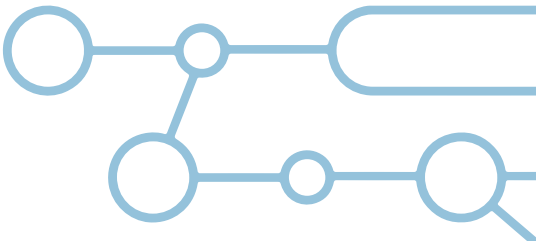
The debate on sanctions versus self-regulation in Press Councils is largely varied, with some at the forefront of advocating for sanctions as the only way to protect journalism and information, while others have conceded that there may be a need for regulation when self-regulation proves incapable of curbing undemocratic practices or resulting damages.

Several Press Councils have stood strong behind the benefits of self-regulation through public discussion and publication of sanctions, which are meant to convince journalists and media outlets to act prudently by upholding their decisions through effective financial and coercive measures. These kinds of measures are generally seen as ineffective, to varying degrees, even unconstitutional in approach and often civilian and freedom-oriented citizenry who patronise mainstream newspapers.

The question of consequences and accountability is critical in this whole scenario, where the requirement for media outlets to publish statements of ethical breaches has been recognized as a form of accountability and transparency on behalf of media outlets. Self-regulation is considered important in today's ever-evolving landscape because it provides for a faster resolution on information disputes compared to the court system, hence why it's fully viewed as an integral part of a healthy information environment ecosystem.

The interviews identify one significant issue noted, namely the lack of awareness among journalists and media about the potential contributions and support that Press Councils can provide. Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why there is a perception of the latter being merely instruments of inconvenience rather than entities that contribute valuable assistance. However, there does seem to be an indication that comes when media outlets become aware of Press Councils when they are directly affected, through their responses as well as provision of evidence when faced with criticisms, complaints, or claims, evidencing in fact respect for the work done by the council.

To some extent, what seems missing is a prior commitment from media outlets to actively promote, support, or finance Press Councils, revealing overall a limited degree of dedication beyond situations that will directly impact their interests. This observation brings the need for journalists and media outlets to reach out to develop a clear understanding of the roles, principles, and effectiveness of Press Councils, moving beyond merely perceiving Press Councils as overseers then adapting them to just guarantor of ethical standards protecting journalist rights.



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