Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1407 (1999)[1]

Media and democratic culture

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The Assembly stresses that the media are vital for the creation and the development of a democratic culture in any country. They provide people with information which influences the process of shaping opinions and attitudes and of making political choices.

2. Therefore, the media must be free, pluralistic and independent, and at the same time socially accountable. These are also the conditions for establishing widespread credibility. The Assembly recalls, in this respect, its Resolution 1003 (1993) on the ethics of journalism.

3. Free media cannot thrive in an undemocratic country. It is therefore the role of politicians to ensure that the political and legal conditions are met so as to enable, on the one hand, media to perform freely and, on the other, to guarantee individual freedoms and other fundamental human rights.

4. Sheer quantity of information, especially in a situation of strong media concentration, does not by itself provide variety and quality. Neither does intensification of communication necessarily make people more able and better qualified to take decisions or to influence decision-making processes.

5. The media situation in Europe varies from one country to another, depending on cultural traditions, economic might, the strength of democratic institutions and the level of professionalism. However, with the opening up of practically all the countries of the continent, with the intensification of co-operation and integration between them and with the emergence of new information technologies, the media are increasingly facing the same sort of problems. These problems require the same sort of co-ordinated approaches.

6. Media independence remains one of the most difficult issues. Even where democratic traditions are deeply entrenched, the right to voice both facts and opinions is sometimes limited. Methods vary from the mild hindering of access to information, through state monopolies on paper or on distribution, refusal to grant radio and TV licences (or imposing excessive restrictions on them) and legal prosecution, to closing down newspapers, television and radio stations, physical intimidation and violence.

7. The delicate relationship between freedom of expression and the citizen's right to objective, undistorted information is another chronically difficult issue. The media can still be used as an instrument for settling scores, both political and personal. The increasing commercialisation and competition in the media sector pushes even serious media towards "standardisation" and sensationalism, preference for "infotainment" and an excessive emphasis on crime and violence.

8. Public service broadcasting (which should not be confused with state owned media) has traditionally been considered as a guarantee that all segments of the public, including minority groups, are provided with programmes that are impartial and varied, free of government or partisan interference, comprising information, education, culture and entertainment. In reality, though, it is often subject to political and economic pressures and to increasing competition from commercial broadcasting, which is becoming cheaper and more readily available due to the new information technologies.

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1. Assembly debate on 29 April 1999 (15th Sitting) (see Doc. 8355, report of the Committee on Culture and Education, rapporteur: Mr Jarab). Text adopted by the Assembly on 29 April 1999 (15th Sitting).

9. Bearing in mind that the democratic culture of a society cannot be imposed but that conscious and sustainable efforts are necessary to develop it so that it can respond appropriately to new challenges, the Assembly recommends that the Committee of Ministers:

9.1. monitor closely the state of freedom of the press in European member and non-member countries, so as to:

a. exert moral and political pressure upon governments which violate freedom of expression;

b. defend and protect journalists who are victims of such violations.

9.2. develop further its assistance and co-operation programmes for the reform of media legislation, in particular:

a. the drafting of clear guidelines for public access to information and the functioning of government press services, and ensuring that those guidelines are followed at all levels;

b. the elaboration of guidelines concerning the right to privacy and the disclosure of information about holders of political or public office, following the proposals in Assembly Resolution 1165 (1998) on the right to privacy;

c. methodological and practical assistance to member and non-member countries which may need it in ensuring fair coverage by the media during election campaigns;

9.3. ensure the application of legislation and rules for the protection of freedom of expression and of other fundamental human rights, including the rights of children, in accordance with the principles of the Council of Europe, in particular Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights;

9.4. enhance the media aspects of its programmes on education for democratic citizenship and on the development and consolidation of democratic stability;

9.5. continue its assistance in developing public service broadcasting in central and eastern Europe along the lines of its Recommendation No. R (96) 10 and carry on monitoring developments in this sector Europe-wide;

9.6. encourage the development of self-regulatory mechanisms in the media, for instance by collecting examples of good practice and raising awareness of them, and establish a special framework for information on regulation and self-regulation concerning new communications and information services;

9.7. pay greater attention to the question of media independence in the context of market competition and globalisation, namely by:

a. considering ways of ensuring editorial independence in countries where the economic conditions do not allow media enterprises to function independently;

b. carrying on work on media concentrations, providing practical assistance to member countries along the lines of its relevant recommendations and placing emphasis on questions of transparency concerning ownership and funding;

9.8. foster education on the media and by the media, for example by encouraging the appropriate authorities in member states to:

a. provide educational and training opportunities for journalists aiming at the highest standards of professionalism and ethical conduct;

b. develop media (traditional and electronic) literacy as part of school curricula along the lines set out in Recommendation 1276 (1995) on the power of the visual image, for instance by acquainting students with codes of conduct for journalists and by encouraging the making of school newspapers and broadcasts in co-operation with professional journalists;

9.9. ensure better co-ordination between the different Council of Europe bodies involved in co-operation and assistance programmes in the media field and step up co-operation with media associations, independent bodies such as press complaints commissions and other relevant non-governmental organisations, including those organised by and speaking for media consumers;

9.10. promote better co-operation and complementarity between the media programmes of international organisations, in particular the European Union, Unesco and the OSCE.