

Resolution 2419 (2022)¹

The role of the media in times of crisis

Parliamentary Assembly

1. While freedom, pluralism and independence of the media are vital preconditions for our democratic societies, the importance of a healthy media ecosystem is even more apparent in times of crisis. Free and independent media must provide citizens with accurate, comprehensive and high-quality information; this being both a right and a duty. It is vital for citizens to have access, through the media, to relevant, reliable, clear and factual information during a crisis, as this can have a decisive impact on society's ability to cope effectively with difficult situations such as health crises, environmental disasters, acts of terrorism, social violence or armed conflicts.

2. The media can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and multicultural understanding, and in preventing or minimising oppression and conflict. However, when a crisis, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic, threatens the prevailing understanding of individual freedoms, debates tend to polarise and fragment society itself, which is reflected in online and broadcast content. Such polarising crises are likely to happen in the future and their impact on public debate demands that the media take a comprehensive approach to effectively informing and involving the public.

3. Free and independent media must be the driving force behind critical analysis of the causes of a crisis. Media professionalism is one of the preconditions for constructive public debate on how to deal with a crisis and this debate must involve politicians and various groups in society. The media help to stimulate discussion about the right measures to counter the causes and adverse effects of a crisis and to overcome it; in addition, they facilitate citizen participation in discussions about the long-term changes that are needed to increase society's resilience to crises of the same type or to prevent them more effectively.

4. The media help to reinforce the legitimacy of the decisions taken by political leaders and to improve understanding of both their content and the reasons for them; the media also play a key role as a link between decision makers and the public. Moreover, the media can take on an educational role: they must be capable of analysing and explaining the new obligations being imposed to tackle a crisis situation and the behaviour that the authorities expect from the public.

5. The risk of online disinformation, polarisation and populism increases in times of crisis. The threat posed by "information disorder" is amplified and the need to prevent and counter it becomes more pressing. The requirement for professionalism and thoroughness in the checking of information before it is disseminated is even greater in times of crisis and the media must be aware of their heightened responsibility – that they must fully assume – including in terms of effectively countering conspiracy theories and inflammatory discourse.

6. While this is a responsibility of all media outlets, public service media have a specific role that needs to be recognised, strengthened and safeguarded. Public service media must remain independent and serve the public because they have a specific remit to fulfil: to be both a force for social cohesion and integration of all individuals and a broad platform for pluralist public debate. In the particular context of crises, public service media should encourage citizens to develop critical thinking and the capacity to compare various sources of information.

1. *Assembly debate* on 25 January 2022 (4th sitting) (see [Doc. 15437](#), report of the Committee on Culture, Science, Education and Media, rapporteur: Ms Annicka Engblom). *Text adopted by the Assembly* on 25 January 2022 (4th sitting).



7. As far as social media platforms are concerned, given the risk of false news or unchecked information being disseminated on their networks, operators should redouble their efforts to counter this trend by developing fact-checking tools and promoting reliable and accurate sources of information. Lockdowns and forced restrictions on movement during the Covid-19 pandemic have significantly increased the importance of the media in general because the free flow of information has also become a means of overcoming the isolation faced by individuals whose freedom of movement is restricted, while the restrictions have made social media much more important as a means of maintaining family, interpersonal, work and social contacts.

8. These various functions are interconnected and complement one another. It is important not to divide them up or limit them. It is wrong and dangerous to assume that governments are best placed to control and distil information in times of crisis as a way of avoiding the dissemination of inaccurate information and effectively directing collective behaviour. An approach of that kind is incompatible with democratic principles and the protection of the right to freedom of expression as enshrined in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ETS No. 5).

9. Collaboration between public authorities and the media is one of the key ways of dealing with and overcoming a crisis. The authorities should support the media so that the latter can perform their various roles to the full. There needs to be a willingness to co-operate despite the critical stance of some sections of the media towards government action, as collaboration between the authorities and the media should in no way undermine the independence of the latter.

10. There is a need to review existing multidisciplinary knowledge and approaches to media and society, communication and crisis management. The media should be able to actively play their role, not only as a means of communicating with the public and shaping public opinion, but also as a channel for the transfer of expert knowledge to institutions.

11. Measures to enhance the role of the media during crises should involve institutions, services, experts and civil society in order to make community, institutional and research processes visible and accessible, and to build trust. Maintaining a resilient and adaptable media ecosystem is the best way to confront crises in democracies. Efforts need to be focused on long-term policies, which start long before a crisis begins.

12. In light of the above, the Parliamentary Assembly calls on Council of Europe member States to recognise and value the role of the media as crucial to the management of a crisis and as an essential element in the wider network of communication, especially in times of crisis, and, in particular, to:

12.1. ensure the conditions for a strong, pluralistic and independent media ecosystem that can support coherent deliberative processes locally and internationally;

12.2. encourage structured collaboration and networking – before, during and after crises – between the media, experts, public authorities, services and the public;

12.3. support collaboration between public service media and institutions with a view to providing permanent spaces for citizens to access and share knowledge about scientific processes in a transparent way, and to recognise the constant evolution of scientific knowledge;

12.4. support critical research and investigative journalism that can explain complex processes that are still being developed and that aim to expose unfair and misguided actions of powerful authorities and businesses, such as corruption and abuse of power;

12.5. support media coverage of scientific debate in order to raise public awareness and increase knowledge of both the technical and social nature of any changes and responsibilities involved in the management and resolution of an emergency.

13. Considering the real danger of online misinformation, polarisation and populism in times of crisis, the Assembly also calls on member States to:

13.1. bring their legislation and practice into line with Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)3 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the remit of public service media in the information society and with Assembly [Resolution 2255 \(2019\)](#) “Public service media in the context of disinformation and propaganda” and [Recommendation 1878 \(2009\)](#) “Funding of public service broadcasting”;

13.2. put in place policies that may reduce the concentration of opinion-shaping power held by social media and create a counter-power, and regulate social media to prevent powerful digital businesses from becoming centres of political power;

- 13.3. put in place policies that may encourage social media to further develop their fact-checking capacity to ensure that business interests do not overshadow the need to respect the ethical principles of any online publication;
- 13.4. support the development of a strong mixed-media approach across sectors in order to counteract polarisation and misinformation driven by digital conglomerates and exclusivist narratives;
- 13.5. ensure that administrative services and institutions can use social media to provide, monitor and collect information during crises, and that citizens can use these media to find information or provide their own. This should be done in compliance with relevant privacy legislation, in particular the Convention for the Protection of Individuals with regard to Automatic Processing of Personal Data (ETS No. 108);
- 13.6. support the media which have developed verification procedures that allow them to play a new role in verifying the accuracy of user-generated information while guaranteeing the right to freedom of expression;
- 13.7. support community media projects and seek to involve citizens more closely in public debates by taking specific measures such as creating and maintaining multidisciplinary social media spaces and involving students in educational activities for the community and communication with the latter before and during a crisis;
- 13.8. support targeted training in science journalism that covers the social sciences as well as the hard sciences, to enhance journalists' ability to report on scientific work and help the public to understand the scientific dimension of crisis management;
- 13.9. support training offered by national and international journalism organisations, universities and research centres that focuses on the sociological study of journalism and on constructive approaches to journalism in training;
- 13.10. support journalistic coverage of both local and global contextualisation and narratives, and discourage nationalistic approaches in the media;
- 13.11. support the production of documentaries and podcasts in order to provide knowledge that can increase the visibility of science, services and institutional work through cultural media output.