



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

Reporting Facts:

Free from Fear or Favour



PREVIEW

OF IN FOCUS REPORT ON WORLD TRENDS IN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA DEVELOPMENT

INDEPENDENT MEDIA PLAY AN ESSENTIAL ROLE IN SOCIETIES.

They make a vital contribution to achieving sustainable development – including, topically, Sustainable Development Goal 3 that calls for healthy lives and promoting well-being for all.

In the context of COVID-19, this is more important than ever.

Journalists need editorial independence in order to be professional, ethical and serve the public interest. But today, journalism is under increased threat as a result of public and private sector influence that endangers editorial independence.

All over the world, journalists are struggling to stave off pressures and attacks from both external actors and decision-making systems or individuals in their own outlets.

By far, the greatest menace to editorial independence in a growing number of countries across the world is **media capture**, a form of media control that is achieved through systematic steps by governments and powerful interest groups. This capture is through taking over and abusing:

- regulatory mechanisms governing the media,
- state-owned or state-controlled media operations,
- public funds used to finance journalism, and
- ownership of privately held news outlets.

Such overpowering control of media leads to a shrinking of journalistic autonomy and contaminates the integrity of the news that is available to the public. However, there is push-back, and even more can be done to support editorial independence and professional journalism.

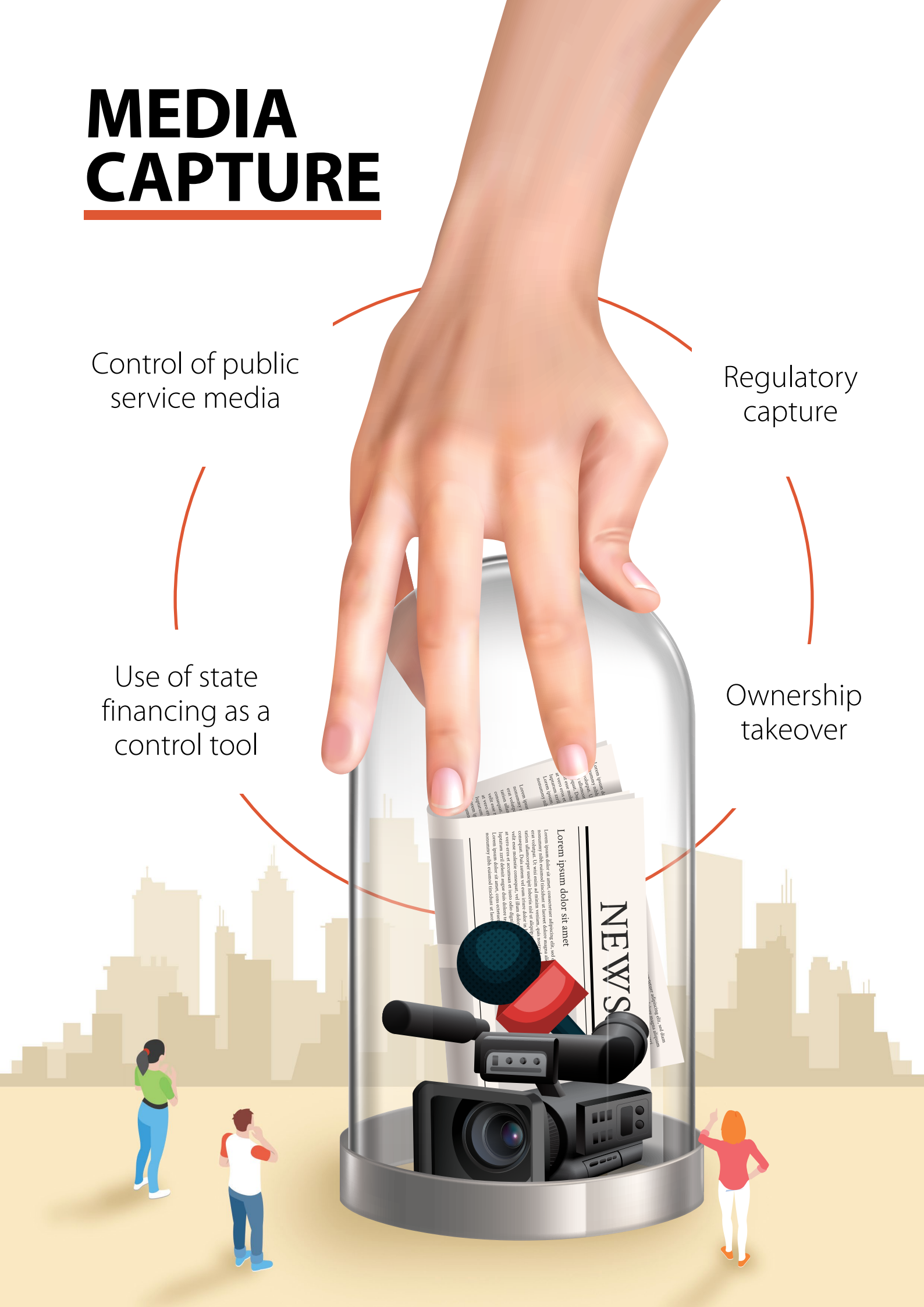
MEDIA CAPTURE

Control of public
service media

Regulatory
capture

Use of state
financing as a
control tool

Ownership
takeover



EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE:

KEY THREATS

MEDIA CAPTURE

Besides media capture, journalistic independence is also threatened by a variety of other factors, which include:

- Undue influence of public relations (PR) shops and the power of big advertisers.
- Churnalism, which is content generated through prepackaged PR materials combined with multiple news sources.
- Challenges to business models which have pushed many media outlets to carry "native advertising". This paid advertising is presented as if it was authentic journalistic content.

Although internet has provided outreach opportunities never seen by journalism before, it has also had negative consequences for independent reporting.

TIES THAT BIND

- Spin and PR
- Pressures from advertisers
- Effects of the tech company business model i.e native advertising
- Gender imbalance
- Churnalism

JOURNALISTIC FAILINGS

The data-driven attention and advertising model of content distribution of giant internet companies has not only damaged a financially-ailing media industry but also pressured some media outlets to adopt a content distribution logic of sensationalist, viral content produced to grab attention.

Gender continues to remain a problem in the news media, skewing the meaning of editorial independence and leading to unbalanced and less diverse coverage.

On top of all these pressures, editorial independence is sometimes also affected by journalists' own failure to follow professional norms and standards. Conflict of interest, involving both financial gains and collusion with politics and at times stemming from a lack of adequate compensation and job security, damages editorial integrity and journalists' reputations.



THE PUSH BACK

While the pressures on editorial independence have proliferated in recent years, there are also intensified reactions from civil society, journalists, international organizations, internet companies and the media industry to mitigate the impact. **Trends include:**



Media outlets have been increasingly successful in experimenting with new financing models. Subscription in particular, has proved to be one of the most resilient to “capture”.



Journalism carried out by decentralized, cross-border investigative networks remains a powerful example of reporting that escapes many of the constraints of captured media environments.



Examples of solidarity among journalists, albeit rare, are especially important in today's increasingly polarized media environments where a financially-struggling independent journalism field is often pitted against a well-funded, government-backed, propaganda-driven media sector.



The response of civil society, manifested mainly through advocacy and public protests, has sometimes forced economic and/or political elites to step back from control.

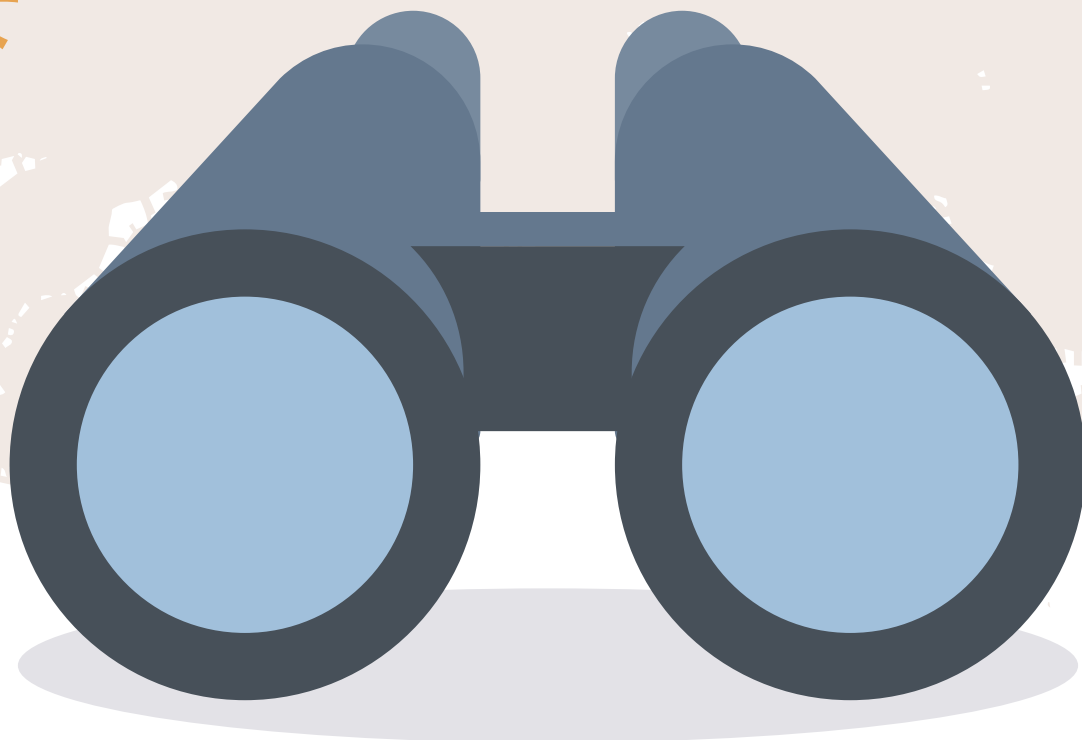


Advocacy from various international organizations including intergovernmental bodies, and or global NGOs has helped to boost transparency of ownership in various countries.



More must be done, especially as the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic is inflicting even more harm on independent journalism. The new challenges are that:

- Economic constraints on media have multiplied as economies have shrunk,
- Public resources for independent journalism are dwindling as priorities are rapidly shifting,
- Legal and regulatory restrictions on free speech are being rapidly imposed in many countries, creating a regulatory environment that further limits independent reporting on the crisis and responses to it.



WHAT TO WATCH:

FUTURE RISKS FOR EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE



Increased control of media (especially after Covid-19)

- Requirements for news media to register with regulators and authorities.
- Provisions on regulation of fake content to be misused for censoring critical journalists.
- Abuse by authorities of data regulations to stop journalists from publishing content deemed to affect personal data and privacy.



State media

- More influence of governments in state media.
- Increased investment in propaganda media including at international level.



Shifts in journalism funding

- Massive financial crisis for independent media.
- Accelerated spending by governments on media raising questions about editorial independence.

To minimize the negative consequences,
there is a need to ensure that:



Independent and verified
information can be delivered by the
media



Media outlets and journalists fully
adhere to editorial policies and
abide by professional standards



Newly-enacted policies and
regulations do not further restrict
the space for independent
reporting



More funding is provided for
independent reporting but with
safeguards against capture



Political and other leaders speak
out in favour of journalists
reporting freely



Global internet companies step
up to promote quality journalistic
content

THE WAY FORWARD →

Independent journalism all over the world is struggling to survive in increasingly captured, polarized environments. Yet more important than ever is media's role in fact-checking and countering disinformation, providing life-saving information, and holding public authorities and companies to account.

Society must act now to ensure that journalists can practice without fear or favour, and to protect the continued role of independent media. This is essential for democracy and sustainable development, especially in today's critical times but also for the years to come.

Anchored in research and inspired by good practices, the recommendations below are aimed at strengthening editorial independence and reducing the negative effects of media capture on journalists' independence and freedom.



State authorities

State-owned or controlled media

- As the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, in times of extreme crisis, media outlets built as propaganda channels lack public credibility. Along with [spreading disinformation](#) or by failure to inform timely and accurately, this can add to the negative impact of such crises.
- To allow for independent reporting and free flows of news, governments - where applicable - should move from a propaganda-based state media model towards a public service media model providing for diversity of content and public interest journalism.

Independence of the judiciary

- To ensure protection of journalists from legal harassment, the independence of the judiciary must be scrupulously respected.

Independence of regulators

- To ensure regulatory fairness for all media actors, the independence of media and communications authorities should be guaranteed by legal and practical mechanisms to ensure their political, organizational and financial autonomy.

Public funding

- To prevent distortion of the market and economic pressures used to control media outlets, laws and rules on fair and transparent allocation of government funding to media should be in place. This applies to subsidies, state advertising or other forms of public financing, and it needs independent oversight mechanisms to ensure that the rules are implemented.

Media ownership

- To prevent the formation of dominant interest groups in the media, regulations should be introduced on media ownership, including rules aimed at reducing ownership concentration and ensuring transparency of ownership. There should also be provisions forbidding media ownership by companies that have lucrative contracts in other industries that are obtained through public procurement.

Regulation of content online

- To prevent political control over the internet, government regulation of online content should follow international standards where free flow is the norm, and restrictions the exception.
- Regulation should focus on ensuring the transparency of the algorithms and policies used to distribute, detect and remove online content.
- Regulation could also require multi-stakeholder accountability of these companies for their policies and practices.
- Incentives for internet companies and media outlets to work together on countering disinformation online should also be considered.



International Organizations

Promotion of standards

- International intergovernmental organizations including UNESCO and other UN bodies, and regional bodies such as the African Union, Council of Europe, EU, and OSCE, should promote professional journalistic standards as well as legal and regulatory standards and good practices ensuring editorial independence.

Legal measures

- International intergovernmental organizations including UNESCO and other UN bodies, as well as regional bodies, should call on governments to refrain from excessive legal measures that harm freedom of speech and prevent journalists from doing their job independently.
- These international bodies should enhance programmes of capacity building of judicial operators to empower these actors when applying international standards of freedom of expression in their decisions.

Journalism funding

- International intergovernmental organizations should encourage governments to include journalism among the financing priorities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ensure the need for criteria of transparency, impartiality and independent oversight on how those funds should be operated.
- Donors should urgently prioritize media and media freedom in their financing policies as a way to support independent journalism initiatives.



Internet communications companies

Tackling disinformation

- To tackle the spread of disinformation on their platforms and avoid attracting potential restrictions that are over-broad, internet companies should take measures to identify, downgrade or (where applicable) remove disinformation, through processes that are transparent and in line with international standards, including protecting the rights to freedom of expression, privacy and redress.

Promotion of independent reporting on social media

- Especially during these times of crisis, as people need and seek true information, social media companies should promote the accessibility of independent journalism.



Media outlets and journalists

Application of editorial policies

- To ensure that editorial independence is given substantive meaning, journalists should enjoy financial security, proactively apply editorial policies for their work, and strengthen their self-regulatory practices and mechanisms such as media councils or an ombudsman.

Solidarity

- To boost resilience in the face of attacks from dominant interest groups and governments, journalists and media institutions should step up efforts such as establishing clubs, associations or other forms of unions, to foster solidarity in the journalism field.
- Collaborative reporting projects should be started or strengthened.

Gender equality and diversity

- To ensure inclusive reporting, media organizations' policies and practices aimed at promoting gender equality and diversity in the news media should be adopted and enforced, building on [UNESCO's Gender Sensitive Indicators for Media](#).



Media development and donor organizations

Emergency funding

- To help independent media outlets survive the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, media development and donor organizations should help to cover the core operational costs of such outlets. Internet companies have a role to play.

Support for advocacy and policy work

- Where authorities are introducing disproportionately restrictive policies and regulations, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, there should be support for grassroots NGOs that advocate against such measures.



Journalism education and training institutions

Enhancing training to avoid and mitigate media capture and strengthen knowledge and skills

- Tertiary and other journalism training institutions should reinforce their curricular content to prepare current and future journalists to cope with media capture, negotiate with power and affirm journalistic integrity.
- This means spreading the knowledge and skills needed to protect editorial independence and to deliver ethical and professional journalism about the key concerns of the public.

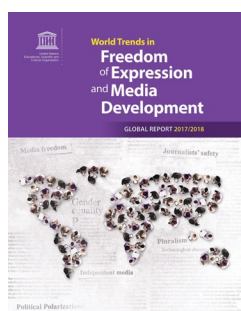
This brochure provides a preview of a forthcoming study on media independence, part of the World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development series. The series is supported by UNESCO's Multi-Donor Programme for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists.



Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Marius Dragomir is the Director of the Center for Media, Data and Society. He previously worked for the Open Society Foundations (OSF) for over a decade. His research is specialized in media and communication regulation, digital media, governing structures of public service media and broadcasting, spectrum management, and ownership regulation. He has authored expert studies and articles on journalism and media policies that have been published and translated in more than 60 countries.



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