

Editorial

Dear Readers,

“The press must have the freedom to say anything so that certain people do not have the freedom to do anything.” This was expressed by the French statesman, diplomat, and man of letters Alain Peyrefitte. “Watchdogs”, “gatekeepers”, or the “Fourth Estate”, whatever we choose to call it, a free media is the indispensable guardian of liberal democracy.

But how does this freedom fare in today’s world? In her report, Katharina Naumann draws a picture with some rays of light but many shadows. After all, free journalism is facing mounting pressure in many countries around the world. China, the emerging superpower, is intent on nothing less than exporting its own understanding of journalism, namely propaganda. On the other hand, some positive developments can be seen, as not least due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many people around the world have been reminded of the importance of independent and reliable reporting.

Meanwhile, it is becoming increasingly clear that the media – and particularly new, digital media – require a minimum level of regulation to protect freedom of opinion from abuse through targeted disinformation, with significant harm to public discourse. It is a fine line: a law suited to fighting fake news in a democratic state can quickly become an instrument of censorship in the hands of an autocratic regime, suppressing critical voices. Just as democracy is unthinkable without a free press, it is only in a democratic state that the media can enjoy lasting freedom.

In this edition of International Reports, Tobias Schmid develops an approach for how a free society can fight disinformation on the one hand, without illegitimately stymieing freedom of opinion on the other. He calls for a graduated regulatory model that attempts as far as possible to avoid passing judgment on the content of statements and opinions as right or wrong, good or bad.

Ukraine also faces a difficult balancing act, as Toni Michel analyses in his article. Since 2014, the country has been locked in a hybrid war in which the disinformation campaigns of pro-Russian media play a prominent role. The author pleads for the country to meet this challenge decisively, albeit based on transparent processes and decisions taken by independent bodies.

Mexico is notorious as one of the most dangerous countries in the world for journalists. As Hans-Hartwig Blomeier und Luis Téllez Live point out, in addition to the threat posed by organised crime, media representatives in Mexico are evermore confronted by the aggressive and polarising rhetoric of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

Olaf Jacob and Adriana Amado observe similar trends in Argentina. Mounting tensions between President Alberto Fernández and the media, combined with a strong reliance of many newspapers and broadcasters on state-funded advertising, are putting a strain on freedom of the press on the southwestern bank of the Río de la Plata.

Even a look at the country often described as the largest democracy in the world provides cause for concern. Peter Rimmele traces how the Indian government has steadily narrowed the freedom of expression not only of India's journalists but also of its creative artists, despite significant resistance from the Indian judiciary.

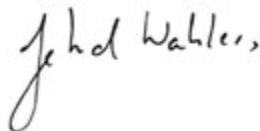
Nonetheless, there is also cause for hope, often due to innovative journalists and media holding their own despite the adverse conditions. Using the examples of two companies in Sub-Saharan Africa, Christoph Plate and David Mbae show how dependability, quality, and faith in new, digital formats are paying off for the media and successfully bringing them through the pandemic. In turn, Ulf Laessing reviews the media landscape in the Middle East and North Africa. Even though many of the democratic promises of the "Arab Spring" remain unfulfilled, the genie of liberty is out of the bottle in the media sector, too, and is breaking fresh ground not least by means of independent, private online formats.

Finally, Ferdinand A. Gehringer, Hartmut Rank, Mahir Muharemović, and Stanislav Splavnic take a closer look not on journalists but on the judiciary in Southeast Europe. How far does freedom of expression extend for judges, where does their duty of independence set legitimate limits to this freedom, and where are governments using this obligation as a pretext to muzzle defiant judges?

The objective of authoritarian rulers is to silence critical voices. They have generally come to understand the formula "no democracy without a free press" and are drawing their own conclusions. Germany and Europe should oppose this by promoting free journalism as an integral component of democracy around the globe while also demonstrating "at home" that even complex problems such as regulating disinformation can be solved by applying a basic principle: always err on the side of free speech!

I hope you will find this report a stimulating read.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gerhard Wahlers". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Dr. Gerhard Wahlers is Editor of International Reports, Deputy Secretary General and Head of the Department European and International Cooperation of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (gerhard.wahlers@kas.de).