

Democracy requires independent media. Philanthropy should help



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For a democratic regime to function effectively, it needs, among other priorities (notably education), a media system that operates properly.

All over the world, political and civic debate is becoming more tense, more emotional and more aggressive. This situation, linked to the economic and geopolitical context, is aggravated by the growing impact of social networks, and the new attitudes they provoke – but also by the major difficulties facing the media industry.

Both public and private business models are in crisis. The media are less and less able to play their key role in the democratic process: explaining, verifying and debating. That's why philanthropy can and must provide solutions to enable the media to continue to act in a way that is useful to society. This is a matter of urgency and needs to be well supported

Operating properly entails 3 key aspects:

1. Offering **balanced, well-documented information** accessible to all, enabling citizens to form their own opinions on issues subject to democratic choice. This requires well-trained professional journalists who have the time to follow themes. It also means that various viewpoints and different media are easily accessible and can operate independently (free from political or commercial pressure).
2. Ensuring a **public debate space** where citizens' viewpoints and questions are freely expressed, respectfully acknowledging differences and, if possible, openly. This implies that

media must be capable of organizing this debate, moderating it, and using it to augment information on the topic. It demands the absence of technological or financial barriers to accessing dialogue spaces.

3. Producing **socio-cultural content** (performing arts, music, film, exhibitions, etc.) in the broad sense that reflects society's diversity and realities, thereby fostering a sense of common identity or coexistence (shared destiny). This requires professional production expertise (sound capture, editing, etc.) and the capability for broad dissemination.

These three key aspects, which enable the media's contribution to the democratic process, share a common point: they necessitate adequate and sustainable funding of the media system.

However, media financing is failing, for both private and public media, audiovisual and print alike.

The private media business model under pressure

The closure of newspapers, the significant reduction in their number of pages or their merger and absorption by entities generating revenue from non-journalistic activities are frequent phenomena.

This global phenomenon has two main causes. The first is the rapid decline in advertising revenue caused by digital competition and audience fragmentation, along with new media planning practices. The challenge of selling paid content (subscriptions or single copies) as the culture of free content spreads with the development of data marketing. While the public readily spends on access, they are far more hesitant to fund content.

The private broadcasting business model is just as difficult, at least for players that do not have a large critical mass. The sharp increase in rights, particularly sports rights, plays a major role in this trend.

Vulnerability of Public Funding

Today, most public service media are under pressure too, regarding the definition of their mandate (reduced scope) and the resources provided. Key reasons for this include significant pressure from private media, which are struggling and seek limitations in the public sector (advertising, digital development), and attempt to secure a portion of public budgets by claiming they also offer a form of public service.

Political pressure also plays a role. The political culture has shifted under the influence of social networks towards impatience and intolerance, prioritizing short-term reporting. Investigative and critical journalism is deemed less and less legitimate, and media are bypassed by politicians preferring to control their image directly through social networks.

Decreasing acceptance of direct licensing fees is another reason for the decline of quality media. With the population increasingly finding it unfair to fund media they do not fully or sufficiently consume, and a significant portion rejecting information that does not confirm their viewpoint, more taxpayers are voicing their disdain for public funding.

The crisis in the two historical sources of media financing is deep and irreversible, exacerbated in smaller countries lacking the critical mass to bear their costs (commercial market or content sales; higher average public service fee with fewer households due to a significant portion of fixed costs). This precarious situation is likely to worsen with the disruption of the entire media ecosystem value chain by artificial intelligence (concept-design-distribution).

A third way that is becoming essential

In this context, considering media's necessity for the proper functioning of a democratic society, an alternative must be sought. This is where the philanthropic approach comes into play. Potential actors include foundations, Individuals/family offices, Companies (CSR), local Communities, etc.

Two legitimate logics can be observed. The first is that actors wishing to invest in media contribute to the proper functioning of democratic society. They then support the triad (balanced information, public debate space, socio-cultural production). The second are actors clearly wanting to promote an ideological (or commercial) viewpoint.

In the first logic, philanthropic supporters must prove they pursue no hidden intentions and must ensure the legitimacy of their actions. This requires reliance on a professional and transparent charter, stringent monitoring, and gathering effective documentation that reviews experiences and draws lessons.

This is precisely the goal of the 'Media-Common Good-Philanthropy initiative', a project to be developed within the Geneva Center for Philanthropy, at the University of Geneva.

To do this, the GCP will have to look at the relationship between the 'media' and the 'common good' (typologies and criteria) to design a new charter for philanthropic commitment in the media sector.

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