



The European journalism landscape consists of various sectors – as Reference, we represent the sector of independent public-interest media. The members in our network are (relatively) new media organisations founded between one and ten years ago and include both for- or non-profit, hyperlocals and media who specialise in investigative journalism. They are active in print media, audio media and digital platforms. What unites them is a strong belief in well-functioning democracies in Europe, based on best-informed citizens.

In the past ten years, we have seen that this sector of European independent public-interest media has contributed greatly to pluralism – especially in those countries where public media are state influenced and commercial media are increasingly [consolidated in ownership](#). The number of independent media outlets is rising (as mapped by [Netzwerk Recherche](#)) and their impact is growing (as can be seen, for example, in the number of journalism awards won by these outlets).

However, the sector is facing three main **challenges**.

**1. The financial sustainability of independent public-interest media is under threat as there is little core funding.**

Most independent public-interest media have a diverse income stream, but the support from external funders often covers the main part of the budget. These funds are in most cases project based; they cover a specific journalistic investigation. In most European countries, there is no financial support for *infrastructural* costs - the money needed to keep the core of the organisation up and running. This means they need to hop from project funding to project funding.

As independence is at the core of these organisations, this represents a threat. Because how can an organisation guarantee a focus on editorial choices, when they need to ‘sell’ each project to an interested funder? Inevitably, investigations are steered towards those topics that funders find relevant, rather than those topics the journalists find relevant. In our midst we have an example of an organisation who has, for this reason, been focussing on stories on European fishing quota, while editorially, they would make different choices.

Another issue lies within the growth of the organisations. As most of the independent public-interest media have only been around for a few years, they need means to grow and innovate. For a small organisation, the management is relatively uncluttered, with minor administration and a barely relevant legal status. But when this organisation wants to transition into a larger and more

sustainable structure, the legal requirements become stricter and more rules need to be followed. This means a budget is needed for legal affairs, human resources and administration. But as the funding is focussed on editorial projects, it can be very hard to find the funds to allocate to this kind of organisational growth. This means many organisations remain small, and the collective influence of this sector is smaller than it could be, which plays in the hands of the established, traditional media organisations.

**2. The funders' focus on cross-border journalistic collaboration can result in the underreporting of important national and local topics.**

The independent media sector in Europe is relatively young, and so far there has been a huge focus on cross-border collaboration. Journalistic organisations from various countries are encouraged by funders to team up, and collectively cover those stories that bear relevance for a greater European audience. This has resulted in many award winning projects and productions (like the [Pandora Papers](#)) and solid collaborative networks. But there is also a downside. Especially in those countries where the funding comes from Central European bodies, like Portugal, Greece, Italy and Spain, journalistic organisations find it almost impossible to secure a budget to cover important national and local topics. Even though as Reference, we are a great supporter of cross-border collaboration and support, we also want to underline the importance of each organisation being able to shed light also on the specific realities that are facing a particular country - as they are now silenced.

**3. Consolidation in ownership and distribution threatens independence.**

[Research](#) by the European Federation of Journalists has shown that there has been a major consolidation in the European media landscape in the past ten years. There have become less media organisations and they have become bigger in both size and influence. This has an economical effect, but also an editorial. Pluralism is under pressure as the political and economical influence increases. For the independent media organisations we represent, this seems to have no direct impact – they are after all fighting this system from the outside, often challenging the big forces in their own respective countries. But there is an effect of this consolidation.

For one in distribution as there are now less outlets to negotiate with. Especially for those organisations who depend on others for distribution, there is less chance to obtain a fair pay for their work. This has an influence again on the whole chain - as freelance reporters will also receive a lower fee. But also when it comes to gatekeeping, the consolidation means that the power lies with only a few. This is especially apparent when looking at social media. Many independent media organisations depend on social media for their distribution and reach, but are struck hard when algorithms change.

## **Suggestions**

For the issue of consolidation, we recognise that there are many different legal ecosystems in the Union, making it perhaps hard to fight a united battle. However, we believe the Committee should do all it can to limit the media consolidation and the emergence of media monopolies in order to guarantee media plurality, especially for the independent media sector. In many European countries, the independent media sector is still struggling to be recognised as part of the national media landscape. Here, non-profit journalism, community journalism and emphatically named *independent* journalism are considered activism rather than journalism. By recognising our sector as a fundamental, integral and relevant part of any pluralistic journalism landscape, the overall impact of our work can be even greater.

For financial sustainability, we believe there is a perspective that can be offered to the member states. In our midst, we have organisations from countries where infrastructural support for *all* media (not just public service broadcasters) is secured. A good example is the Netherlands, where the Government installed a [Journalism Fund](#) as an independent administrative body. With a secured budget of approximately € 5 million and thematic funding to support, for example, investigative reporting at the local level, the Journalism Fund is able to offer organisational support to various media players in the country. With an emphasis on managerial support, innovation and ultimately financial independence, the Journalism Funds supports a healthy and dynamic pluralistic journalism landscape.

We suggest that the European Commission advises this framework to be replicated and/or adapted by other nation states.

## **About Reference**

Reference is a self-organised, pan-European network of independent public-interest media. We believe in well-functioning democracies in Europe, based on best-informed citizens. The multiple challenges of our societies can only be met with fiercely independent and financially sustainable journalism. We underwrite a collaborative approach to empowerment and believe that together, we can make a lasting difference that can't be ignored. Our ultimate goal is to develop the independent media sector into an established presence in Europe. We aim to accelerate each other's growth into mature and stable organisations and to raise awareness within civil society and governments about how to support our sector.

Our members are:

[Apache \(BE\)](#)

[A Mensagem \(PT\)](#)

[Reflekt \(CH\)](#)

[Investigate Europe \(DE\)](#)

[Facta.eu \(IT\)](#)  
[Follow the Money \(NL\)](#)  
[The Dublin Inquirer \(IR\)](#)  
[IRPI \(IT\)](#)  
[Are we Europe \(BE\)](#)  
[Reporters United \(GR\)](#)  
[The Bureau of Investigative Journalism \(UK\)](#)  
[Correctiv \(DE\)](#)  
[Divergente \(PT\)](#)  
[Investico \(NL\)](#)  
[Investigace \(CZ\)](#)  
[Scoop Macedonia \(MK\)](#)  
[Átlátszó Erdély \(RO\)](#)  
[Re Baltica \(LV\)](#)  
[Direkt36 \(HU\)](#)  
[Oštro \(SI\) and Oštro \(HR\)](#)  
[Arena for Journalism in Europe](#)