

MEDIA FREEDOM AND INNOVATIONS

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Professor Pier Luigi Parcu [European University Institute]

INTERVIEW

Pier Luigi Parcu: More work to be done on press freedom in Europe

Much of Europe may be in a privileged position when it comes to media freedom, but we must not become complacent, says Professor Luigi Parcu on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day.

Professor Pier Luigi Parcu is the Director of the Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom at the European University Institute in Florence.

Could we perhaps start with why you think press freedom is important?

Freedom of the press means the freedom to communicate and express through published papers and electronic media. Press freedom as part of freedom of expression is fundamental, because it enables people in making informed choices based on the free flow of information. It represents one of the main pillars of a democracy.

In 1948, the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human

Rights stated: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference, and impart information and ideas through any media regardless of frontiers."

How would you judge the state of press freedom in the EU at the moment?

Let's first say that we, as Europe, are somehow privileged concerning democracy and freedoms, among them press freedom. But, in Europe there still exist difficult situations for press freedom and the journalistic profession, such as in Hungary or Bulgaria. We also shouldn't forget the Western Balkans, where journalists are often assaulted and, sometimes, also killed because of their job.

In some countries defamation is still punished with jail. Of course there were three days of horror in Paris last January with the slaughter at Charlie Hebdo, but we hope that such unbearable violence will never again be part of our life.

Could you go into a bit more detail about the situation in Hungary and Bulgaria?

Concerning Bulgaria, in July 2013, several journalists and reporters were victims of police violence while covering demonstrations outside the Parliament in Sofia. Many of them were exposed to harassment and

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attacks on their cars. The 2014 World Press Freedom Index ranked Bulgaria as the worst Country in Europe for press freedom.

In Hungary, everything started in 2011 when the government lead by Victor Orbán introduced a very restrictive media law, introducing high, and not balanced, fines for advertising revenues. In that case, we have witnessed a strong political interference in the media, and more specifically in information content. That has been even clearer with what happened to Klubradio, the radio station which was a symbol of the right to be informed. Hungary's New Media Council refused to renew their licence, to silence this dissenting voice. Only after a strong campaign and the involvement of the European Commission was Klubradio granted a licence.

What are the solutions?

It is a difficult question. I suppose that an increasing awareness on problems like press freedom and freedom of expression could be an important first step. Secondly, I think that in case of negative member state interventions, action must be taken at a European level to be effective.

How does it compare to other regions of the world?

Europe, in general, lives in a more positive situation with regard to the respect of fundamental rights and thus also press freedom. During the last year, we have unfortunately witnessed outside Europe serious menaces to the journalistic profession. Let's think about serious and unacceptable cases in Turkey, Egypt or Russia, where journalists were imprisoned, or even killed, only because they were doing their job. These episodes represent examples of what has to be avoided and Europe cannot accept.

I want to stress one point. Very often

barriers to press freedom are associated with Internet foreclosures. The Internet today is more and more central in our everyday lives. Social networks, blogs and any other platform can be perceived as "dangerous" to power as traditional media.

Are there problems associated with the Internet in relation to press freedom?

Generally speaking, I agree that the Internet played, and still plays an important role, not just for press freedom but of course for freedom of expression. The Arab Spring of 2011 has clearly shown it, even though many people do not agree on this vision. Without that interconnection, through social media, nothing would have happened. The Internet is more pervasive and without borders. This is why the Internet is perceived as a menace in authoritarian regimes. Through the web, people can get information, be aware of reality and probably become more inclined towards protest. So, in the end I believe that the Internet enhances press freedom.

What are the biggest threats to press freedom?

Generally speaking, the biggest threat to press freedom is represented by authoritarian regimes, dictatorships and any other situation where the power does not want people to be informed correctly and aware of what is going on. Look what happened during Nazism in Germany, or in Italy with Mussolini, or in the USSR with Stalin.

Very often, in non-democratic countries, journalists are perceived as a threat, as a menace to Power, because they can disclosure "secrets" or just waking up population's conscience inviting them to react.

How do we safeguard it against these threats?

In Europe, Article 10 of the European

Convention of Human Rights provides the right to freedom of expression and information as necessary in a democratic society. This right includes the freedom to hold opinions, and to receive and impart information and ideas. In non-democratic countries, safeguarding these rights appear much more difficult.

Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of press freedom both globally and in the EU?

I'm always an optimist. Thus I believe in a positive future also for freedom of expression and press freedom. As you probably know, we – as a Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom at the European University Institute – are currently running, for the second year, a very challenging project, the MPM – Media Pluralism Monitor – for the European Parliament and Commission. The Monitor is not a therapy, but is a sort of Watch Dog instrument that, through an accurate analysis based on different indicators (legal, economic and socio-political), offers a photograph of the situation of Media Pluralism in each Member State. We hope that a repeated use of the MPM will help, in time, to improve our common conscience of the risks and the potential threats to this essential instrument of democracy.

EurActiv.com | Mark Briggs

News industry turning mobile, US study shows

The news industry is struggling with a shift to mobile, getting scant revenues as more readers turn to smartphones and tablets for information, according to new research published in April.

These are among the findings of the latest Pew Research Center's State of the News Media report, highlighting an ongoing shift in the US and European news industry landscape.

The report found that 39 of the top 50 digital news websites had more traffic from mobile devices than from desktop computers in early 2015, although researchers said people generally spend more time reading news on PCs.

Overall, the news media is seeing much of the same trend as it has over the past few years – declines in print circulation and advertising, and a rise in digital news consumption, albeit with more limited revenues, Pew found.

The continued decline in advertising revenues has coincided with digitisation and growing concentration in the media industry, which journalist unions and EU lawmakers warn could put press freedom at risk.

"Tycoons have been buying media outlets and in many countries appear to exert media control," warned the European Federation of Journalists. According to the EFJ, "new actors including Google threaten not only [threaten] media pluralism but increasingly the survival of many freelance journalists, who often only face one media employer, especially at local level".

Among the bright spots for the US industry was television news, where some segments managed to gain viewers.

Pew said broadcast network



Post-modern stethoscope. [Johan Larsson/Flickr]

newscasts boosted viewership by five percent last year, but cable news channels had another difficult year -- with prime-time viewership down eight percent across the three major news channels.

Bad news for print

For newspapers, it was more bad news: daily and Sunday circulation fell another three percent in 2014.

Advertising revenue dropped four percent to \$19.9 billion – less than half of what it was a decade ago.

That was only partly offset by a one percent rise in circulation revenue, which suggests rising prices for print editions and subscriptions.

Pew said that for "legacy" media like newspapers, data is not available to separate the digital-only segments at each organisation.

But the report said digital revenues "remain largely on the wish list" for news organisations, and offered no breakdown on mobile ad revenues for news properties.

The news media, however, is unlikely to get much from mobile ads since five firms – Apple, Facebook, Google, Pandora and Twitter – took in two thirds of mobile ad revenue, the report said.

Digital ad revenue across all media grew to \$50.7 billion in 2014, according to eMarketer figures cited by Pew.

Mobile ad spending now accounts for 37% of all digital ad spending, with Facebook getting 24% of all display ad revenue and 37% of mobile display.

Digital 'bumps'

The Pew researchers found the digital side of the news industry is continuing to grow, but unevenly.

Large capital injections were reported by Vice News – which raised a reported \$500 million last year – and Vox Media, which publishes Vox.com and The Verge, and is valued at some \$380 million after its \$46.5 million funding round.

Meanwhile BuzzFeed, which has been expanding with its own new capital, had to deal with "ethical questions surrounding the removal of posts that spoke negatively of key advertisers", the Pew report said.

And longtime tech journalism outlet Gigaom shut down in March, when it was unable to pay its creditors.

Pew said the number of entries in digital news are now "so numerous and

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varied that they are difficult to keep track of” and that “the pace of technological evolution and the multiplicity of choices... show no sign of slowing down”.

The researchers said the top “digital news entity” was Yahoo-ABC News, with more than 127 million users, including 93 million who access from a mobile device.

The others in the top 10, in order, were CNN, NBC News, Huffington Post, CBS News, USA Today, BuzzFeed, The

New York Times, Fox News and Mail Online. Each of the top 10 had more users on mobile than desktop.

For large newspapers, digital audience numbers far outpaces circulation. The New York Times, for example, had an average weekday print circulation of less than 650,000, while its website and apps attracted nearly 54 million visitors in January 2015.

But Pew said online visits averaged just 4.6 minutes for The NYT, indicative

of the “fly-by” nature of online news.

Newspapers have done little to alleviate their financial woes.

Overall advertising revenues fell to \$20 billion last year, down from a peak of \$47 billion in 2005. But digital has failed to make up more than \$3.5 billion of the total.

Newsroom employment was down another three percent in 2013, the latest year for which data was available, Pew said, after a six percent drop in 2012.

INTERVIEW

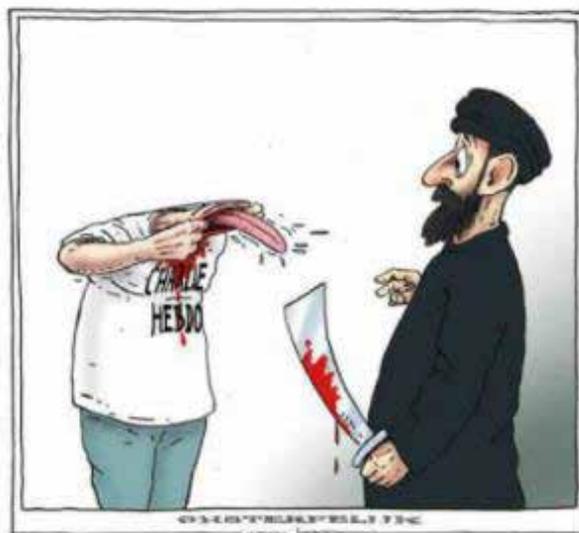
Satirist: Technology is challenging cartoonists

The Charlie Hebdo atrocity has given cartoonists a renewed sense of mission, even if they sense more danger, according to graphic art professor Vincent Baudoux. However, the situation is very different in the Middle East, and the internet – capable of beaming cartoons around the world instantaneously – is posing new challenges to Western cartoonists.

Vincent Baudoux is a professor at the Ecole de Recherche Graphique des Instituts Saint-Luc de Bruxelles, where he specialises in press cartoons. He has curated numerous exhibitions including the 2007 Quick et Flupke, ketjes de Bruxelles to celebrate the centenary of Hergé. He answered questions from EurActiv's Jeremy Fleming.

How much has there been a change of atmosphere for cartoonists working in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo atrocity?

For our cartoonists here in Western Europe, much has changed, but at



Joep Bertrams, “Immortal”, with permission

the same time little has changed. The atmosphere is different, because there is now a certain fear, which was not the case before the Charlie Hebdo murders. At the same time, cartoonists have decided to keep working as usual, because to do otherwise would be to send a signal to the radical extremists that they have the ability to influence events and to impose their views.

The recent event on press freedom in the Bozar in Brussels saw some differences of opinion, do you think it is fine if some cartoonists choose to avoid sensitive subjects?

Being a cartoonist in some countries (for example certain Muslim countries)

is dangerous, because religion is linked to political power, so any criticism of any authority whatever is considered to be a form of delinquency. Therefore, many of these cartoonists choose to avoid any kind of political reference. One of them said, “With each cartoon, I am handing them my head on a plate.” On the other hand, Western European cartoonists appreciate more than ever the freedom they have to work on sensitive subjects. Here in the West the political world generally appreciates the work of cartoonists because it is necessary in the context of societies enjoying open and pluralistic media, particularly with regard to images. We

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must remember that Europe too had its period of iconoclasm, to which the Roman Catholic church responded with all the exaggerated profusion of the Baroque period.

Do you think editors have a duty to consider the safety of their staff, as well as freedom of expression, when considering what cartoons to publish?

Yes, of course, editors do have a responsibility to protect their staff, but the cartoonists themselves think more in terms of freedom of expression than in terms of their personal safety, because they believe that they are protected by public opinion and by democratically elected powers. In the case of Charlie Hebdo, the cartoonists exercised their freedom of opinion –

to the point of provocation – knowing that their building was protected by the police. Let's remember that a policeman lost his life as well as the journalists.

Why is technology making it less easy for cartoonists to control their own content?

This is a really important question because it raises the issue of clashes between cultures. Firstly, the internet means that a cartoon which is intended for a local readership in the West can be seen within seconds all over the world in completely different cultures with completely different values. So something which is innocent here can become something dramatic elsewhere. Also, it is so easy with current technologies to make alterations to the original cartoon, such as changes in the

wording of the caption, or additions or cuts to the drawing in order to modify its meaning. However, the cartoonist remains responsible because the cartoon still bears his signature.

What future do you see for the European tradition of the satirical cartoon?

I don't think that anybody can answer this question truthfully. Nobody knows how to predict the future. I would add that every social system has always believed that it is immortal, but history proves to us that this is not true. History also shows us that things move far more rapidly than people expect. If you can't adapt to change, you disappear. Our Western model is based on wasting energy – is this sustainable? A cartoonist has no more power over history than over the future.

European specialist media dodges crisis

European specialist media companies are offering contrasting strategies for coverage of European affairs against a backdrop of crisis, executives said at an event staged on World Press Freedom Day (3 May) in Brussels.

In a session at the event called Difference Day on European media – titled “A Europe section in every newspaper” – VRT Europe correspondent Rob Heirbaut asked media commentators how they thought European specialist media was faring.

Heirbaut said that he had witnessed several attempts at establishing such specialists EU-focused news services failing during his professional career.

Thomas Friedrich – a member of



Rob Heirbaut [Flickr/VUB]

the council of the international press association (API/IPA) and Brussels correspondent with VDI-Nachrichten – said that one of the key problems with offering such a service direct from Brussels was language.

People preferred to read news in their native tongues rather than in one language, despite the prevalence of

English.

Matthew Kaminski, the executive editor of Politico Europe, said that the US outfit's strategy was to offer a niche service in English examining power politics from the angle of the personalities involved.

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Guilty pleasures

“We want to be a guilty pleasure for power brokers,” he said, explaining that Politico was aiming itself at a relatively small audience of Europe’s key influencers.

EurActiv’s founder Christophe Leclercq, said that attempts to centralise a top-down EU-centred media were unlikely to succeed.

EurActiv’s strategy, he explained, was to cooperate with media in the member states and offer a devolved web service in 12 languages, since in his opinion an offering in English alone was unlikely to gain purchase with readers across the different capitals.

The seminar took place against the backdrop of discussion of wider difficulties with the media sector.

All forms of contemporary media are “desperately seeking a new model” to stave off competition and the relentless decline of advertising revenue, French academic Julia Cagé told delegates at the event in a keynote address.

Cagé proposed the creation of a new non-profit news corporation blending elements of a charity foundation with a commercial enterprise.

She said such a structure – to be described in detail in a forthcoming book called ‘Sauver Les Medias’ (‘Saving the media’) – would enable media to work independently from external shareholders, advertisers and government.

Both Politico and EurActiv suggested that their media were moving against the grain of the established media models.

Kaminski said that Politico had been established as an antidote to the traditional press by journalists disenchanted by the Washington Post’s ability to move with the times.

The crisis offered the media sector the chance of radical change, said Leclercq, who said EurActiv’s

Innovation4Media initiative was a response to the need for media to operate avoiding both working subsidies and over-regulation.

Prize for muffled Saudi

The event included the inauguration of the “Honorary Title for Freedom of Expression”, which was awarded to the Saudi Arabian dissident blogger and activist Raif Badawi.

His wife will accepted the prize by video link, since Badawi remains imprisoned in Saudi Arabia for standing up for freedom of press.

The event was held at the BOZAR by the Brussels Platform for Journalism – a collaboration between the Belgian universities VUB, ULB and Erasmushogeschool Brussel, with the backing of UNESCO.

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