

F1. Consideration of challenges and risks for media

Fragmentation of media

The media are becoming increasingly diverse and complex, and audiences are fragmenting. In most countries, one can no longer be assured that most people will see or hear a story on national radio or television or read it in a major newspaper. At the same time, new technologies make it easier to produce media and to access a wide range of media, through digital television with hundreds of channels, cell phones, new radio stations and the Internet. There is also a dramatic change in how news is made and disseminated: the model of the authoritative, trustworthy news institution is breaking down, as Internet and cell phone technologies make it possible for ordinary people to produce and share news.

We have seen the rise of citizen journalism, blogs and media-sharing portals. Another trend is technological convergence. You can now watch television and listen to the radio on your cell phone, read newspapers online, surf the Internet on your television with a set-top box, make phone calls from your computer, record audio on your phone or MP3 player and reach wide audiences by posting podcasts, photos or videos on the Internet. This has dramatic implications for the ways in which the media can influence public discussion and policy-makers. In a number of countries, bloggers exert a great deal of influence on the mainstream media and thus on political life.

It is important to keep up to date with these developments and to seek innovative and effective ways to respond to them, while not forgetting traditional media, as, in many countries, radio continues to be the most commonly used medium among those without media access. Despite the rapid proliferation of different media platforms in recent years, some populations still cannot listen to the radio, watch television or access the Internet, either because they lack money to pay for equipment, because of gender-based discrimination or because they live in remote or hostile terrain, with no signals and where transmitters cannot be erected.

Language and jargon

In general, health and governance stories are riddled with complex language, technical economic terms and numbers, which are challenging for both the media and audiences (103). The media must communicate scientific, medical and political information in a way that the public can understand and provide clear information about the concepts and how to apply them.

The legal context for the media

How freely and independently the media and citizens can hold those in power to account depends partly on the legal context within which they conduct their activities, which derives from international legislation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights is the international law that determines how other laws are interpreted. In its Article 19, the Declaration establishes a fundamental guarantee of the right to freedom of expression, including the freedom of the media. This has repercussion on and influences Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Any person must have the right to freedom of expression; this right must include the freedom to investigate, receive and share information and ideas of any nature, without considering borders, whether oral, written or printed, through art or any other means of their choice.

There are similar regional treaties in Africa, the Americas and Europe, each of which provides similar guarantees on freedom of expression and media freedom. At national level, however, regulations may stifle the independence and impartiality of the media. In this context, the media can use ethical values to determine whether they can run a story and from what angle.

Engagement on budget in a closing civic space

Media is a critical component of the civic space, not least because of the importance of the fundamental freedom of expression but also because the media have the power to hold governments to account, reveal violations and provide a platform for the most marginalized voices (108). Dozens of governments are erecting legal and logistical barriers to democracy and rights, publicly vilifying and harassing their domestic and international CSOs, the media, human rights and aid groups. This has seriously reduced the space for manoeuvre for the media and civil society.

This should be the golden age for free speech, as our smartphones can call up news and information from the other side of world in seconds, and we can connect with the rest of the world via social media at any time. New media or social media have become effective, accessible tools for active citizen participation and engagement. As they operate in real time, new media may be ahead of traditional media in drawing immediate attention to an issue. Anyone with access to the Internet can be a publisher. Nevertheless, the world today is a more dangerous place for journalists, defenders of civil society and human rights, and the general public often does not understand the risks of having a public profile on-line and how to mitigate those risks. The number of journalists and defenders of human rights who are imprisoned, attacked or killed is increasing (109).

Cyber security

Media companies are often manipulated because of their wide audiences.