

Concept Note

Sustainable Journalism in Practice

The world is facing an era of immense environmental, social, and economic challenges, both at a local and global level. These challenges demand a new understanding of the role of journalism in society.



Independent journalism is an inalienable part of democratic and sustainable societies.

Just as independent journalism is an inalienable part of democracy, it can also be seen as an essential element of an environmentally, socially and economically sustainable society. Given this way of regarding journalism, the points of departure for sustainable journalism can be described from two concurrent sustainability crises:

- The sustainability crisis facing society, related to climate change, poverty, inequality, and crumbling democracies.
- *The sustainability crisis facing journalism*, which stems from an erosion of revenue

streams, fierce competition from the global social media companies, restrictions of freedom of expression, media capture, disinformation and deteriorating public trust in the media.

These two crises can be regarded as intrinsically intertwined. A sustainable society – environmentally, socially, and economically – demands journalism that explicitly addresses the sustainability challenges faced by society. Journalism must in turn have ability to meet this demand to stay relevant and financially viable.

Based on this logic, there is a need to expand the traditional role of journalism to entail what we call *sustainable journalism*: independent, viable journalism that not only safeguards and promotes democracy, but which is an enabler of a sustainable society as well.

Sustainable journalism is not simply a matter of reporting the events of the day. It also reflects on how decisions, processes and activities will affect the ability of future generations – our children and grandchildren – to enjoy the same or improved opportunities as our own generation; as well as how local and global events are interconnected. It also includes seeing environmental, social and economic sustainability not as just another subject, but as a prism through which everything else is to be seen.

The challenge for media outlets is thus to develop strategies that answers to the need to improve the economic sustainability and viability of the media while at the same time improving journalism's contribution to a sustainable society. The aim of this conference is providing an informal and open environment where we jointly can share experiences and inspire each other and find innovative answers to these challenges.

The crises and opportunities facing society and journalism are one and the same.

The climate crisis demands fundamental changes to our fossil-based economy, changes that are not taking place at the required pace. Democracy is in retreat. Globally, progress towards gender equality is slowing down.

There is, however, another picture: never before in human history have so many people been committed to saving the environment, to halt climate change and ensure gender equality. Nor have there ever been so many creative initiatives and collaborations between the media, civil society, academia, and the public to safeguard democracy and promote sustainability. We also see increasing interest on the part of businesses and philanthropists in supporting innovative, independent journalism.

Independent, quality journalism is under threat from political repression. Independent media outlets are being captured by corporate and state powers and global social media corporations have seized the lion's share of digital advertising revenues. And yet, on a daily basis, we see outstanding journalism produced, exposing abuses of power, enlightening the public about the climate threat and explaining how society functions – or doesn't function. Journalism that is based on a deep knowledge and extraordinary communicative ability.

Evidence-based knowledge is challenged by populist leaders who, without any scientific arguments, question the conclusions of researchers and their right to autonomy. And yet the scientific community and journalists continue to create and communicate the knowledge we need to confront the challenges we face today and tomorrow. Innovative solutions emerge from collaborations in research, from dialogue and discussions, from listening to and learning from each other and building knowledge together, based on gender equality, diversity, and a respect for human rights. Journalism plays a crucial role in this process.

The increasing polarisation in society in combination with large groups not having access to quality journalism are increasing societal gaps. There can be many reasons for a lack of access to relevant journalism; poverty, language, place of residence, level of education, gender or disabilities. Journalists who know their audiences and want to reach new groups are reporting on relevant issues and publish in accessible and attractive formats. This way they help to bridge gaps in society and empower marginalised groups.

Many journalists live under threat – harassed, persecuted, even murdered – and yet the commitment of the United Nations, democratic governments and civil society makes it possible for journalists to continue to hold power to account and provide the public with the information they need to make informed and sustainable decisions.

Today's journalists pursue a demanding profession. They must learn the craft of journalism in an age of digitisation that requires them to master text, photographs, video and audio. They need to have a solid grounding in the issues facing the society and communities they report on, not least when it comes to sustainability.

There is a great need, as well as a significant opportunity, to develop qualitative, independent education institutions and long-term in-house training programmes for journalists, both within academia and for mid-career professional development.

Connecting journalism to international governance documents

If journalism is seen in this light, it can be connected to five international governance documents and processes:

- *The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948), where Article 19 declares the right to freedom of opinion and expression, a prerequisite for independent journalism.
- *The Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future* (1987), which first defined environmental, social, and economic sustainability, providing the foundation for our concept of sustainable journalism.
- *The Beijing Platform for Action* (1995), especially Section J on Women and the Media.
- *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (2015) and its *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs). How well humankind is able to fulfil the SDGs formulated in Agenda 2030 will be crucial to achieving sustainable development. Poverty is not solely a matter of lacking food, money, healthcare, and education, it also deprives people of the opportunity to obtain knowledge and to engage in and contribute to a more equitable distribution of power. From this multidimensional perspective on poverty, independent journalism is important to enable people to have power over their lives.
- The Paris Agreement (2016) and the following process. The future of humanity rests on how well the signatories to the Paris Agreement fulfil their undertakings on climate change. Independent journalism is needed to hold those in power to account and to provide people with the information they need to be able to contribute to a sustainable world.

Faced with these challenges and opportunities, it is more important than ever to strengthen public access to reliable information. This will require increased collaboration between journalists, media publishers, civil society, researchers, state actors and the business community in both rich and poor countries.

References

- Berglez, P., Olausson U., Ots, M. (2017). *What Is Sustainable Journalism: Integrating the Environmental, Social, and Economic Challenges of Journalism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Dame Adjin-Tettey T., Garman A., Kruger F., Olausson U. Berglez P., Tallert L., Fritzson W. (2021) *Towards sustainable journalism in sub-Saharan Africa* (2nd edition). Fojo Media Institute. <https://fojo.se/en/resources/publications>
- Dean W. *The lost meaning of 'objectivity'*. The American Press institute. <https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-essentials/bias-objectivity/lost-meaning-objectivity/> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- Deselaers, P., James, K,m Mikhael, R., Schneider, L. (Mars 2019). *More than money – Rethinking Media Viability in the digital age*. DW Akademie. <https://www.dw.com/downloads/47825755/dwa-discussion-paper-media-viabilityweb.pdf> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- Henry C., Rockström J., Stern N. (2020). *Standing up for a Sustainable World*. Cheltenham, Northampton, Edward Elgar Publishing Limited.
- Kovach B., Rosenstiel T. (2007). *The Elements of Journalism*. New York: Three Rivers Press.
- Raworth, K. (2017). *Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think Like a 21st-Century Economist*. Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.
- Tallert, L. (March 1, 2021). *Transforming traditional journalism into sustainable journalism*. People Power Truth, Fojo Media Institute. <https://peoplepowertruth.com/transforming-traditional-journalism-into-sustainable-journalism/>
- The Guardian. *The Guardian's climate pledge*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/ng-interactive/2020/oct/05/the-guardian-climate-pledge-2020-environment-emergency-carbon-emissions> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- United Nations. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>
- United Nations. (1987). *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*. <http://www.un-documents.net/wced-ocf.htm> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- United Nations. (1995). *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. In *Report of the 4th World Conference on Women, Beijing, 4–15 September 1995*. (A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1) <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/250039?ln=en>
- United Nations. *Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals*. <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- United Nations. (2015). *The Paris Agreement*. <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-paris-agreement/the-paris-agreement> (downloaded January 2, 2021).
- United Nations Global Compact. Home page: <https://www.unglobalcompact.org/> (downloaded January 9, 2021).
- Yearly reports 2018–2020 from the following organisations: 1. V–Dem Institute, University of Gothenburg: “Liberal Democracy Index”; 2. The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU): “Democracy Index”; 3. Freedom House: “Freedom in the World”; 4. International IDEA: “Global State of Democracy”.