Non-profit community media all across the European Union have contributed to a pluralistic media landscape for decades. Above all, they produce social value by empowering citizens of all ages, ethnicities, genders, and religions. They offer a platform to receive personally relevant information, speak up for themselves, connect with others, and create projects outside the media realm. Community media enjoy a high reputation in groups usually under-represented in the media, like migrants, women, elderly, or people with disabilities.

It is typical for community media in Europe that their programmes are multilingual, both within the schedule and sometimes even within a show. With these services, community media contribute to social inclusion. So, both diversity and social accountability are crucial to community media. This was already pointed out by Peter M. Lewis in a report for the Council of Europe’s Groups on Specialists on Media Diversity in 2008.1 As participation-based media, they enable citizens to be active and critical users as well as active producers of media content. It is apparent that their focus on participation, social inclusion, and social cohesion clearly distinguishes them from both public and private commercial broadcasters.

It is thus noticed, with both some astonishment and disappointment, that the European Commission’s “Action Plan to support recovery and transformation of the media and audiovisual sectors” from December 2020 includes no single mention of community media. Especially the third section “Enable and empower” and in particular “Action 9 – Empower citizens” seems to be predestined for mentioning the important work that community media are doing across the European Union.

Community media play an important complementary role to public and private broadcasting, particularly in local areas, where they are often the only news source that reports on local events, but they do more than that: they create public value on their own. As empirical studies have shown, they enable articulation processes, support participation, offer media literacy training, and deal with the development of strategies of media convergence.2 It has been natural for community media to keep on contributing to society in all these areas even during the Covid-19 pandemic.

A report of the German Thüringer Landesmedienanstalt (TLM)3 from May 2020 shows that community media have adapted both the programme scheme and the programme content in

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the pandemic. Covid-19 was a frequent topic, with information about the situation in the local area standing out. So, considering the Commission’s Action Plan, the European community media sector has a lot to offer for the strengthening and protection of democratic processes in the European Union. They are directly anchored in civil society by informing, educating and empowering citizens to actively participate in public affairs, particularly in rural areas and in multilingual urban areas, thus contributing to a pluralistic democratic debate.

Concerning Action 9 – Empower citizens, the importance of media literacy in the empowering process, as described in the Action Plan, is reflected in the daily work of community media. A background paper by Chapman et al. (2020)\(^4\) for the Council of Europe shows that the promotion of media literacy, especially the training of the public in media production, is seen as a “core business” within the community media sector. With its journalistic training offer, community media contribute to combating disinformation. They teach essential digital media skills, too. This enables the participants to find their way in an increasingly digitalized world and act in a self-determined manner.

Besides, community media promote media literacy through various informal and indirect methods, such as active media production and “learning by doing”. The acquired skills help people to make use of their right to freedom of expression and their right to participate in public and political life. The latest Media Pluralism Monitor Report\(^5\) founds a “lack of systematic and state-level effort to increase media literacy”. A stronger involvement of community media, accompanied by formal and legal recognition, sustainable funding, and fair access to distribution platforms, could help EU member states to advance their media literacy strategies.

CMFE would be happy to participate in the European News Media Forum as proposed by the Action Plan, and to have the opportunity to explain to the European Commission in more detail the core competences of community media briefly described here. We would like to suggest developing strategies on how community media can be more strongly integrated into the Commission’s efforts of strengthening democracy and a sound media environment crucial for democratic societies.

On behalf of the CMFE Board

Birgitte Jallov
President

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