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# **MEDIA ACTIVISM HANDBOOK**

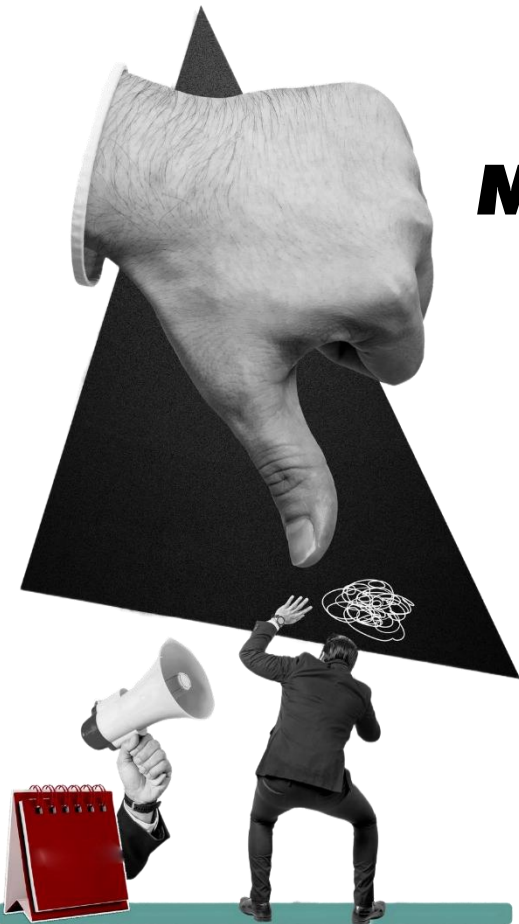


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# **MEDIA ACTIVISM HANDBOOK**

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# INTRODUCTION

Media and communications today represent a critical area of modern political struggles. Issues such as editorial policy influence, ownership concentration, information security and surveillance, the quality of information, and the role of media platforms in public discourse have become central points of discussion. Democratic media are not merely channels of communication but prerequisites for democracy. In repressive regimes, independent journalism operates under pressure or disappears entirely. The media crisis is global, with media often captured by corporate and political interests.

Global trends of polarisation, wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, technological changes, and the dominance of major tech platforms further endanger independent and quality journalism. Media activism thus becomes essential to uphold the values of public interest in media and communications.

The purpose of this handbook is to map good practices of media activism to inspire activities for defending public interest in media and communications, including the promotion of media and information literacy.

## **IN PRACTICE, THIS MEANS:**

- Empowering individuals to critically evaluate media content.
- Promoting ethical journalism and media freedom.
- Advocating for robust media literacy programs.
- Encouraging collaboration among educators, journalists, and activists.



# **MEDIA AND INFORMATION LITERACY**

Media literacy enables individuals to access, analyse, evaluate, and create media content in various formats. It represents the functional literacy of individuals in the 21st century. Media literacy is a key skill for combating misinformation, building informed societies, and fostering active participation in democratic processes.

## **SKILLS ADVOCATED BY MEDIA LITERACY:**

- Understanding bias, stereotypes, and agenda-setting.
- Recognizing the consequences of online activities - digital footprint.
- Critical thinking - evaluating sources and verifying the authenticity of information.
- Understanding journalistic codes and ethics.
- Understanding the role of media in society.

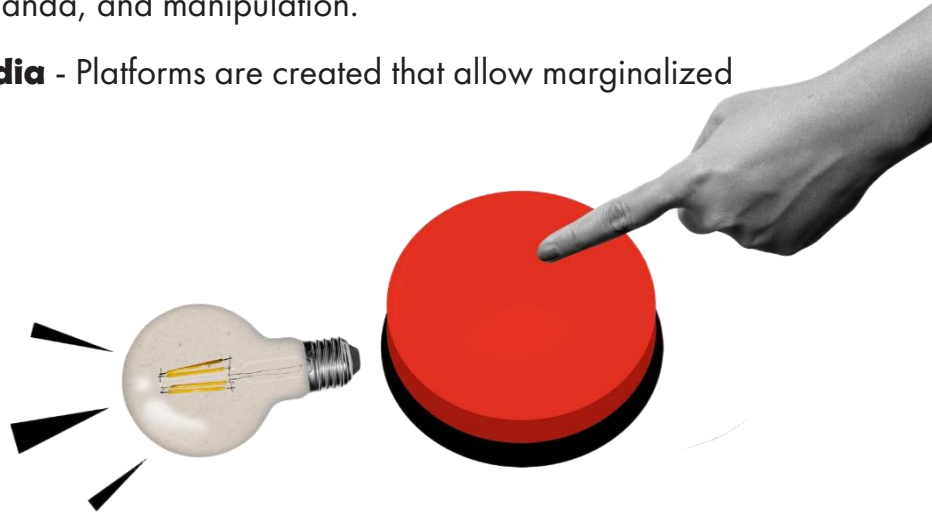
# WHAT IS MEDIA ACTIVISM?

Media activism encompasses a range of activities aimed at reforming media institutions, policies, and practices, as well as creating alternative media that promote democratic values. Activism can be analysed through various theoretical frameworks, including media freedom, media democratisation, communication rights, media justice, and cultural environment.

Media activists seek to influence media policies, media independence, media structure, and content using tactics such as pressuring media, raising public awareness, advocating for diversity in the media, and supporting alternative media with integrity. Media activism covers a broad spectrum of issues related to the media, including communication on platforms that are not exclusively journalistic (Hodžić, 2024). Its goal is to engage different target groups, such as journalists, legislators, state institutions, various civil groups, and the wider public.

## COMPONENTS OF MEDIA ACTIVISM

- **Advocacy for Media Policies** - Activists work to change the legal framework to ensure media freedom and independence.
- **Capacity Building** - Trainings are organized for journalists and media workers to enhance their ability to report critically and ethically.
- **Media Literacy Campaigns** - The goal is to raise citizens' awareness about recognizing fake news, propaganda, and manipulation.
- **Support for Alternative Media** - Platforms are created that allow marginalized voices to be represented.



# WHY SHOULD I ENGAGE IN MEDIA ACTIVISM?

Media activism has a long history that spans different geographical and political contexts. As early as the 1920s, activists in the United States advocated for a non-profit media sector. During the 1960s and 1970s, movements for the rights of African Americans and women focused on issues related to media and communication. Anti-capitalist movements from the Third World were a driving force behind the New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) in the 1970s and 1980s. Similar examples of activism have been recorded in Brazil, Korea, and other parts of the world (Hodžić, 2024).

Media activism is important even when you are dealing with topics that are not directly related to the media, as the media plays a key role in shaping public opinion and drawing attention to social issues.

Even if your primary focus is "ecology" or "women's rights," here are a few reasons FOR media activism:

## WHY?

**Visibility of the issue:** Through media activism, you can reach a broader audience and make your topic, whether it is environmental issues or women's rights, more visible and present in the public in the right way.

**Fighting disinformation:** Both aforementioned topics are often subjects of disinformation and manipulation. Media activism allows you to spread accurate information and counter narratives that downplay the importance of these issues.

**Support:** Well-designed media campaigns help engage communities, gather support for your goals, and exert pressure on decision-makers.

**Connection of topics:** The media is a powerful tool for highlighting the interconnectedness of issues. For example, the climate crisis impacts human rights in certain segments, which you can emphasise through media activism.

Don't forget that journalists who responsibly and unobstructedly do their job "represent the voice for those who have none," and thus, the fight for free media and media with integrity is a fight for all of us.

## HOW?

As an activist, your goal is to make your message heard. Media activism is a tool that helps your topic move beyond a narrow circle of experts and reach a broader audience, thereby opening up space for change. Additionally, advocating for credible and responsible media work helps individuals and media outlets address the issues important to you without obstruction and with the support of the community. The frequent pressures on journalists create a very unfavourable environment in which individuals (journalists) must work in their own interest.

**Using platforms:** Launch social media accounts, blogs, or campaigns on existing social media channels that advocate for a responsible media approach to the topics you are already addressing.

**Educate and inform:** Create content that helps people understand your topic. Highlight the manipulations present in your topic and the harm they cause. Support media outlets that responsibly do their job by showcasing good examples.

**Partnerships with journalists:** Establish cooperation with journalists or media organisations that professionally do their work.

**Advocating for media literacy:** By raising awareness about the importance of media literacy, teach people how to recognise manipulations and disinformation related to your topics. And provide support to responsible journalists whose work will be recognised.

**Creative campaigns:** Organise public events, exhibitions, performances, or other creative activities that draw attention to the negative impact of poor reporting on the topic you are addressing and advocate for media literacy for citizens.



# THE MEDIA OF THE WESTERN BALKANS AND IN TURKEY

A report by Human Rights Watch (2015), based on interviews with 86 journalists, states that journalists in the Western Balkans work in a hostile environment, which directly affects their ability to report critically and independently, essential for a democratic society. The 69-page report, titled "A Difficult Profession: Media Freedom Under Attack," documents physical attacks and threats, including death threats, lawsuits aimed at punishment, and smear campaigns targeting journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia.

According to the same report, independent media in Turkey mainly operate through online platforms. Authorities regularly order the removal of critical content from the internet or negative reports related to government ministers, the president, and members of the judiciary. Journalists face criminal prosecution under the Anti-Terrorism Law, as well as charges of criminal defamation, including the often-used charge of "insulting the president," which the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) has stated is not in line with the right to freedom of expression.

# MEDIA LITERACY INDEX

The Media Literacy Index ranks countries based on their potential to resist "post-truth" and its negative consequences. The index combines four main indicators, with varying weights, in the areas of media freedom, education, trust, and citizens' digital habits, in order to calculate and rank the results of countries. The index assesses the potential resilience to the negative effects of declining public trust, political and social polarisation, and media fragmentation.

Media literacy index, Open Society Institute Sofia (2023), contains an instrument for measuring not media literacy itself, but predictors of media literacy with the aim to rank societies in their potential for resilience in the face of the post-truth, disinformation, and misinformation phenomenon.

Rank (1-41)	Country	Score (100-0)	Clusters (1-5)
1	Finland	74	1
2	Denmark	73	1
3	Norway	72	1
4	Estonia	71	1
5	Sweden	71	1
6	Ireland	70	1
7	Switzerland	67	1
8	Netherlands	64	2
9	Iceland	62	2
10	Belgium	61	2
11	Germany	61	2
12	Portugal	60	2
13	United Kingdom	60	2
14	Austria	59	2
15	Czech Republic	58	2
16	Spain	58	2
17	France	57	2
18	Latvia	55	2
19	Slovenia	55	2
20	Lithuania	54	2
21	Luxembourg	53	2
22	Poland	53	2
23	Slovakia	48	3
24	Italy	47	3
25	Croatia	45	3
26	Malta	45	3
27	Hungary	41	3
28	Cyprus	39	3
29	Greece	38	3
30	Ukraine	38	3
31	Serbia	33	4
32	Moldova	32	4
33	Montenegro	32	4
34	Romania	32	4
35	Bulgaria	31	4
36	Turkey	29	4
37	Bosnia and Herzegovina	24	5
38	Albania	23	5
39	North Macedonia	22	5
40	Kosovo	21	5
41	Georgia	20	5

Finland leads the European Media Literacy Index 2023 with a score of 74, securing the top spot among 41 countries. Close behind, Denmark ranks 2nd with 73 points, followed by Norway in 3rd place with 72 points. Estonia and Sweden share similar achievements, each scoring 71 points, placing them in 4th and 5th positions, respectively, while Ireland takes 6th place with 70 points. The ranking ranges from 1 to 41, with scores measured on a scale of 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate better performance.

At the other end of the spectrum, Georgia ranks 41st with a score of 20. Kosovo follows in 40th place with 21 points, North Macedonia is 39th with 23 points, and Bosnia and Herzegovina occupies the 38th position with 24 points.

# MAPPING OF BEST PRACTICES IN MEDIA

Media activists cover a wide range of public interest issues related to media and communication. Their work includes topics such as the representation of minority groups in media content, promoting diversity in employment policies, and supporting alternative media such as community media. Additionally, they address issues such as the independence and role of public broadcasters, transparency in media financing and ownership, the right to access public information, as well as the safety and protection of journalists' rights. Their work also includes monitoring the media to identify bias, stereotypes, and disinformation, raising the level of media literacy, and addressing numerous other issues. The research report "[MOBILIZATION FOR PROTECTING THE PUBLIC INTEREST IN THE MEDIA - Mapping Good Practices of Media Activism](#)" (Hodžić, 2024), which was published within "Our Media: A civil society action to generate media literacy and activism, counter polarisation and promote dialogue" project, highlights different examples of media activism that can serve as inspiration for further activities and actions.

## **PLATFORMS FOR ALTERNATIVE CONTENT AND ALTERNATIVE INTERNET SERVICES**

In authoritarian societies, as well as in the context of the dominant neoliberal ideology, alternative platforms provide a safe and independent space for political subversion and counter-narratives. These platforms rely on the collective work of citizen-journalists, and there may or may not be a form of content editing. Many of these platforms, such as Indymedia or Mosireen, were created during citizen protests and social unrest. Most rely on participatory content production. This category also includes blogs that provide unique perspectives on issues of public interest.

### **THE CASE OF INDYMEDIA (USA and beyond)**

"Indymedia" originally emerged as a platform to cover protests against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle in 1999, but it soon evolved into a global user-driven and demonstrator-led platform. It was created through the collaboration of social justice groups, anarchist, socialist, communist, and ecological organisations, as well as trade unions. During the 2000s, many groups from around the world joined the platform, reaching 175 active organisations by 2014, with shared anti-capitalist and socialist stances. The platform allowed anyone to publish content, with editorial control encompassing the removal of inappropriate posts to a "hidden stories" page. "Indymedia" achieved global impact and lasted around 20 years thanks to the networking of local groups and the spread of protest goals. However, the rise of commercial social networks led to their closure, while some radical participatory platforms have survived with limited local reach..

## COMMUNITY MEDIA

This category includes media that report on and for underrepresented communities, such as certain municipalities, student groups, trade unions, and communities based on ethnic, gender, or other identities. Community media involve members of these communities in production and management. There are various understandings of what constitutes community media, but here they are viewed as media with a clear mission oriented toward the community and the public interest, generally operating on a non-profit financial model. Such a model should, in principle, ensure some insulation from commercial and particular political interests, which ensures more independent and engaged content.

### THE CASE OF TELESTREET (ITALY)

"Telestreet" is an example of a network of local groups providing alternative news to citizens. "Telestreet" is a movement that originated in Italian metropolitan areas, initially with the Orfeo TV station, which broadcast several hours a day with a range of 200 meters. It was founded by media theorist and activist Franco "Bifo" Berardi. Later, the movement grew and included almost a hundred mini TV stations across Italy. These pirate micro-broadcasters with very limited range were created as a reaction to the control over the media in the country by then Prime Minister Berlusconi. They support each other technically and share a web archive of radio broadcasting materials, thus increasing national coverage and ensuring sustainable infrastructure despite modest financial and technical resources (Renzi 2011, 36).

## INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Journalistic projects and platforms providing independent coverage of events in countries governed by repressive governments are essential places of resistance and democratic struggle. Similarly, in media systems that are largely captured by political or economic interest groups through financing and ownership relations, independent media are the only ones holding authorities accountable and reporting on neglected topics and viewpoints.

### **THE CASE OF KOSOVO 2.0 (KOSOVO)**

"Kosovo 2.0," founded in 2010, provides space for alternative narratives, in-depth analysis, personal stories, and diverse perspectives. The platform is known for its unique approach to storytelling and commitment to critical thinking and dialogue. "Kosovo 2.0" uses multimedia, including text, photo essays, videos, and art projects, to cover a wide range of thematic areas, including social justice, politics, gender, culture, and human rights. "Kosovo 2.0" also offers a platform for young writers, artists, and activists to showcase their work.

## **PROJECTS, CENTERS, AND REGIONAL/INTERNATIONAL NETWORKS FOR INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM**

Journalism centers and networks, such as the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP), or investigative journalism centers (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Montenegro), enable demanding, long-term, expensive, and often cross-border investigations, which would otherwise be impossible in other media due to commercialization, political subservience, or simply a lack of resources.

### **THE CASE OF THE DAPHNE PROJECT**

"Daphne" was an investigative journalism project by the French journalism organisation "Forbidden Stories," which coordinated the work of 45 journalists from 18 news organisations after the assassination of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia on October 17, 2017. Journalists gathered and shared a large number of documents and pieces of information, and these stories were published by media organisations worldwide. This was the first international journalism project by Forbidden Stories, based on the idea that investigative journalism based on collaboration is the best defence against censorship. Following numerous investigative journalism initiatives, criminal investigations and resignations of public officials followed. After the Daphne Project published its investigative stories, one of the hired assassins confessed to the murder of the Maltese journalist, the businessman linked to the murder was arrested, and the prime minister resigned due to links between public officials and the mentioned businessman (Simon 2023, 16).

## INITIATIVES SUPPORTING ALTERNATIVE, INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Media activism also includes supporting alternative, independent, investigative media. This support can involve efforts to raise funds, provide logistical, technical, and legal assistance, offer training opportunities, procure equipment, acquire knowledge, and any other activity aimed at developing the capacities of alternative media to provide valuable content and contribute to public debate.

### THE CASE OF THE NOV DAN PLATFORM (SLOVENIA)

"Nov dan" is an experimental digital platform, launched in 2022, aimed at contributing to the sustainability of independent journalism in Slovenia, through gathering financial contributions from citizens (community fundraising) for five independent media outlets in Slovenia – Oštro, In Media Res, Mešanec, Državljan D, Agrument – DJND. The platform is based on the standard of raising funds through the web, optimising user engagement, and testing communication strategies. It was developed by the non-governmental organisation "Danes je nov dan," which addresses issues such as digital participation and civic activism, transparency, and public oversight. The initiative is supported by the "Grant for the Web" foundation with an amount of USD 46,014. As a crowdfunding project, Nov dan aims to empower community members to sustain the platforms and content they value and to encourage cohesion, transforming media audiences from passive viewers into active participants. There are also other similar examples of fundraising in the Southeast European region. They face challenges related to limited readership/listenership/viewership of independent media, low citizen income, and difficulties in maintaining long-term citizen support, but some platforms (mainly those offering unique content and having loyal audiences) manage to secure a significant portion of their income through community fundraising.

## **ORGANIZATIONS DEMANDING MEDIA REFORMS IN THE BROAD AREA OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

At the global level, numerous organisations implement various media-related reforms, including limiting the concentration of media ownership and promoting media pluralism, preserving public service media, ensuring digital participation, protecting privacy, and limiting surveillance of citizens.

### **THE CASE OF FREE PRESS (USA)**

"Free Press" is a non-governmental advocacy organisation for media that represents an example of organisational growth and increased influence through accumulating its work and legacy. Founded in 2003 with a few employees, it has grown into an organisation with more than 35 employees. It has sometimes had a strong influence on Washington's policy regarding, for example, media ownership and net neutrality, public broadcaster funding, and false media reporting (McChesney 2009, 49). "Free Press" forms strategic coalitions with various ideological groups, including, for example, the Christian Coalition and other conservative activists, thus increasing its chances of exerting influence (ibid., 52).

## **REACTIVE ACTIVISM AGAINST RETROGRESSIVE POLITICAL INITIATIVES WITH DEMANDS FOR PROGRESSIVE POLICY**

Media activism also includes ad hoc actions and demands to stop retrogressive policy proposals, as well as long-term advocacy for positive solutions. This type of media activism can involve protests, letters, petitions, media campaigns, and discussions with public sector representatives.

### **THE CASE OF ACTIVISM AGAINST AMENDMENTS TO THE LAW ON AUDIO AND AUDIOVISUAL MEDIA SERVICES (ALBANIA)**

In Albania, there have been ongoing attempts to introduce regulations for online media content. The most recent proposed amendments stipulated that regulators would have executive powers to punish and shut down online media in the case of citizen complaints about their content. Many civil society organisations opposed the amendments, as they could restrict media freedom, given that the independence of regulators is not guaranteed, and the executive measures are too vague and restrictive. Media and media organisations held meetings, wrote letters and opinions against the amendments, participated in discussions with the relevant parliamentary committee, and organised protests in front of the parliament in December 2019 during a plenary session. The law was eventually adopted. However, the actions of domestic civil society contributed to mobilising international public opinion and international pressure to withdraw the law. The Venice Commission issued an opinion in June 2020, stating that the law was “unclear and likely to be discouraging, stifling free discussion and political speech.” The law has not been enforced, and civil society organisations have continued to address it in public discussions, roundtables, TV interviews, etc. The withdrawal of the law was announced in October 2022.

## **MEDIA ACTIVISM AGAINST THE ABUSE OF LAWS: MONITORING, LEGAL SUPPORT, AND ADVOCACY TO PREVENT ABUSE OF LAWS**

There is a growing global trend of using laws to exert pressure on media, journalists, activists, and other oversight organisations, known as strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP). More specifically, this involves the abuse of laws, including defamation defined by criminal or civil law, as well as other laws such as intellectual property, privacy, and data protection laws, through lawsuits aimed at intimidating, silencing, and exhausting the financial and psychological resources of their targets. These lawsuits have a discouraging effect on exposing criminal acts and abuses, presenting alternative opinions, and engaging the public.

### **THE CASE OF THE LEGAL NETWORK FOR DEMOCRACY PROTECTION (LNPD) (Slovenia)**

The network was established during the COVID-19 pandemic and the formation of a government led by the Slovenian Democratic Party, to offer legal protection and challenge restrictive government measures, such as limiting the right to movement, limiting citizens' access to information and participation in decision-making processes, as well as providing support in cases of attacks on independent state bodies, the judiciary, civil society actors, and protesters. LNPD was formed in late 2020, when "Amnesty International Slovenia," "Danes je nov dan," "PIC – Legal-Information Centre for NGOs," and "Institute for Cultural Diversity Open" joined forces with support and collaboration from leading law firms, law professors, and volunteers. LNPD provides advice, submits complaints to government offices, assists in filing lawsuits, files criminal charges against public officials, organises discussions, etc. The Constitutional Court has annulled or requested improvements to the regulations contested by LNPD, and the network has demonstrated great potential for solidarity in defending the rule of law.

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR (FUTURE) ACTIVISTS

Based on the analysis of historical examples and contemporary challenges, the following recommendations can serve as a guide for future media activists who aim to improve the media space and communications in the service of the public interest:

## **Clearly define goals and strategies**

Direct activities towards specific goals, such as media democratisation, improving media literacy, transparency in media ownership and funding, or promoting the right to access information.

Adapt strategies to the local context, drawing on successful practices such as establishing alternative media, launching campaigns for media policy reform, or building coalitions with like-minded organisations.

## **Refresh your tactics**

It is crucial to provide accurate data, as well as practical and accessible solutions to problems. Why not take the opportunity for a new round of research? Or launch an online survey in your community to gather new data that supports your argument?

You can also collect stories from people affected by negative reporting on a particular issue and use them to illustrate your goal strikingly.

The situation may have produced new key actors for your goal, such as influencers willing to collaborate with the media. Explore and adapt your message and tactics accordingly.

## **Shape your message**

Framing is a powerful communication tool. Depending on the frame you choose, you can achieve very different results. You want to shape your advocacy messages so that they are as convincing as possible for the intended audience. Contextual knowledge, i.e., local and cultural understanding, is crucial.

## **Build resilience to external**

Be aware of political and economic barriers, such as corporate dominance or regulatory constraints. Develop long-term strategies that can neutralise these barriers through legal reforms, lobbying, and public advocacy.

## **Collaborate**

Teaming up with like-minded individuals and organisations can increase the chances of achieving your advocacy goals. Developing such collaborations requires a detailed understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of other actors in the field, as well as your own organisation. Consider the following: Who has complementary capacities and connections that your organisation could benefit from, and vice versa?

### **Some aspects to consider before collaborating:**

- Do you share the same goal?
- Do you have similar standards of practice?
- What infrastructure can you use, and is there sufficient support from both sides to sustain the efforts?

## **Focus on media and information**

Raise awareness among citizens about the importance of media activism and empower them through education on critically understanding media messages, recognising disinformation, and participating in media reforms.

Media literacy is the foundation for mobilising the public and supporting communication reforms.

## **Use technology and innovation**

Technological platforms provide opportunities to spread messages, organise events, and engage citizens. Alternative media, such as community media or nonprofit online platforms, can be crucial for distributing public interest content.

Monitor technological changes and adapt to stay relevant and competitive in the digital space.

## **Learn from historical examples**

Analyse the successes and failures of previous media movements to identify effective approaches and avoid common obstacles. For example, campaigns for pluralism in Brazil and public mobilisation in Korea, as shown in the table, provide valuable lessons about the importance of collective actions and local initiatives.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<b>SERBIA</b>	Law on Public Information and Media, Law on Electronic Media, Law on Public Service Broadcasting, Law on Free Access to Information of Public Importance
<b>BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA</b>	Law on Communications, The Law on the Public Broadcasting Service System of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Law on Freedom of Access to Information at the Institutional Level of Bosnia and Herzegovina
<b>MONTENEGRO</b>	Law on Media, Law on Electronic Media, Law on Public Broadcasting Services, Law on Access to Information
<b>ALBANIA</b>	Law on the Press, Law on the Audio-Visual Media, Law on Access to Information
<b>KOSOVO</b>	Law on Public Broadcasting, Law on Access to Public Documents
<b>NORT MACEDONIA</b>	Law on Audio and Audiovisual media services, Law on media, Law on Access to Information Audiovisual Media Law, Radio and Television Law of Turkey, Law on the Establishment and Broadcasting Services of Radio and Television Enterprises, Law on Radio and Television Incomes in Turkey, Law on Regulating Broadcasting on the Internet and Fighting Against Crimes Committed through Internet Broadcasting, Law on the Right to Obtain Information

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This handbook aims to provide, in a concise and accessible format, key findings of the research alongside models and examples of good practices in media activism. It also incorporates relevant data and insights from the *Media Literacy Index* (Open Society Institute Sofia, 2023) and the Human Rights Watch report (2015).



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