

# JOURNALISM FUNDING IN AUSTRIA

Options for reforming media funding

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A study by Medienhaus Wien  
April 2026

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## Overview

Independent journalism is essential for a democracy to work. However, its future is uncertain: the challenges posed by globalisation and digitisation, competition from international platforms and social media have caused Austrian journalism to face an existential threat.

The question is therefore not, or no longer, *whether* but *how* journalism should be funded and supported. There is an urgent need to reform the previous media funding, as is made evident not only by data regarding the Austrian media industry but also by increasing criticism of the current funding system.

This study shows options for transforming the currently fragmented Austrian media funding into a convergent means of funding high-quality, independent journalism. Such funding provides significantly stronger support than was previously the case for the work of journalists in all media types and for preserving the editorial infrastructure of all channels. At the same time, it aims to support digital revenue models and innovations in legacy media, to help start-ups and promote journalism in current areas of social need with specific calls, for example for more local or scientific journalism. To promote diversity, the study also envisages financial help for digital transformation and the development of non-commercial broadcasting, as well as for new initiatives in common-good-oriented – gemeinwohlorientierten – journalism.

The granting of funding is to be made by an independent funding committee consisting of seven people that is strictly non-governmental and non-political and is chaired by a judge of one of Austria's high courts, in close collaboration with KommAustria-RTR GmbH. Experts for this committee are appointed by an equally independent voting senate under judicial supervision, following a call for applications and a transparent procedure.

Journalism as a politically democratic infrastructure for representing the spectrum of social discourses may under no circumstances be promoted and funded according to decisions based on personal taste in terms of its content and especially not be dependent on governments or parties. It was therefore necessary to develop transparent and assured procedures that support recognised quality goals in journalism, as well as ensuring outward and inward editorial freedom. A catalogue of procedures and criteria compiled on a founded basis provides funding decision-makers with a practical tool for quality assessment. Compliance with ethical regulations and editorial statutes is a prerequisite.

## Framework conditions

The study data shows dramatic economic upheaval in the Austrian media landscape. The regionally divided media market is an example of market failure. Only few Austrian media enterprises would currently be economically secure without public funding (and without advertising by the government and companies in the public sector). Very few new journalistic media are being founded. The erosion of advertising payments to Austrian media has been evident in recent years. The study also anticipates a very rapid acceleration of this process in the forthcoming years, based on international indicators. However, the switching to digital sales models in journalism has been hesitant, with at the same time a decline in the paying public

regarding traditional media purchases. Linear broadcasting has also registered these public and advertising losses. Savings have been made recently with regard to journalistic workplaces that push the limits of the qualitative and quantitative resilience of media and human resources. The study shows that within a generation, around a third of these workplaces has been lost, reduced to currently less than 5000 employed journalists and a few hundred freelancers, often under precarious conditions.

Just as it is the task of journalism to contribute to strengthening democracy, it is also the task – indeed a democratic duty (Murschetz 2022) – of political institutions to guarantee the framework conditions for quality journalism.

However, the previous Austrian media funding, divided into different funding channels, has failed in its aims of diversity, quality and sustainability in the Austrian media landscape (Trappel et al. 2025; Kaltenbrunner et al. 2025), despite comparatively being among the highest in Europe (European Commission 2023). In a current report, the Court of Auditors made sharp complaints about essential points such as the decision-making structure for the awarding of funding, the lack of future orientation in the funding programmes and the focus on a few large funding recipients (Rechnungshof 2025, 6). The Media Pluralism Monitor of the EUI Centre for Media Pluralism and Media Freedom also describes a too high media concentration, also regarding media funding, as the most significant problem in Austrian journalism (Seethaler et al. 2025).

The ascertainment of this precarious current situation as the starting point of this study and the criticism of the previous media funding make it clear that funding must be more targeted and transparent in future – and must be significantly increased compared to before.

## Methodology

The methodology applied for the study was qualitative and quantitative. Alongside existing research literature, national and international documents were examined and evaluated by means of document analysis, in particular: relevant Austrian legal texts, databases such as those of Statistik Austria, the RTR media transparency database, the audit report and the transparency portal of the Ministry of Finance regarding Covid-19 economic aid, national and international regulations and directives of funding programmes, as well as their evaluations.

Denmark, France, Canada, the Netherlands and Norway served as international case studies of states with longstanding funding experience, also for digital, innovative media. In addition, qualitative expert discussions were conducted with 39 representatives of various media funding stakeholders in Austria, such as media authority, sector or interest associations. This was supplemented by around 25 further discussions on specific aspects of the study topic with experts with solid practical knowledge of economic and journalistic developments in the respective companies and of projects in detail, as well as with national and international scientists.

## The new journalism funding: guidelines, budget and components

The options devised on this basis for reforming the previous media funding that was fragmented into many different measures and replacing it with overarching, integrative journalism funding focus on 10 main points:

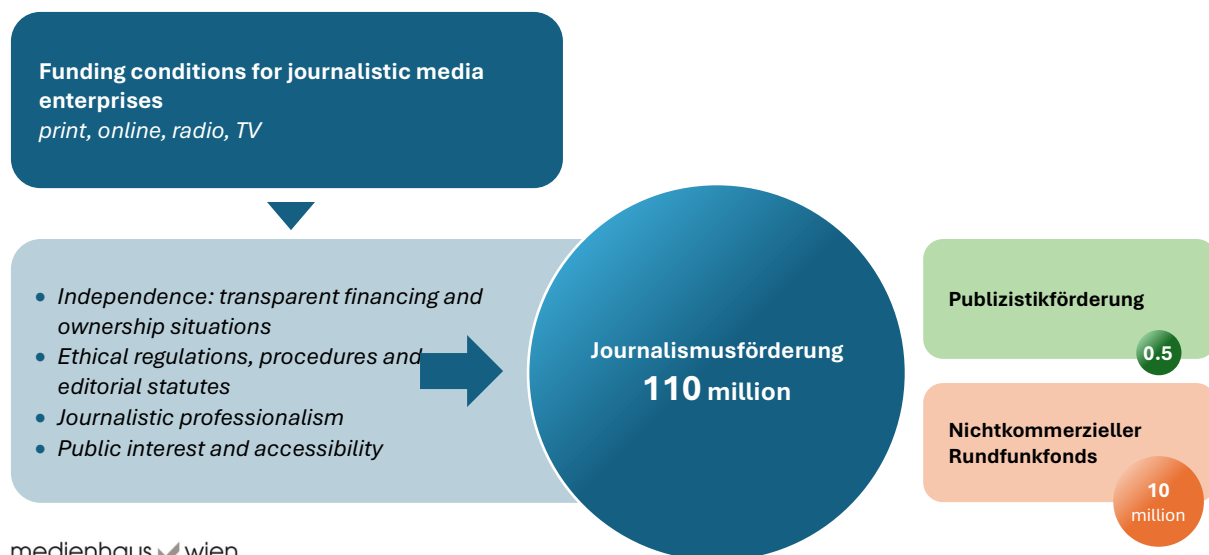
1. Funding should no longer be for media in general but for **journalism in the interests of a quality public benefit** as a democratic infrastructure.
2. The granting of funding should be regulated **independently of government or state**, through an expert committee appointed by a senate.
3. The funding system should be **more transparent**, with an ongoing justification of decisions, substantiated with results reports.
4. All journalistic funding measures are to come **from a joint funding budget**, which essentially comprises **basic journalism funding for the journalistic workforce** (Journalismusbasisförderung) as well as **funding of the editorial infrastructure** (Redaktionelle Infrastruktur; see figure ES-2). It also supports the shift to a new subscription and other payment models for digital journalism.
5. One of the focuses is on supporting **innovation** and new projects. These could be initiatives by existing news media, as well as journalistic start-ups. Specific **funding calls** should take account of current requirements. The **further development of non-commercial broadcasting** is also being pushed, as well as providing a budget for founding and infrastructure support for new common-good-oriented (gemeinwohlorientierte) **journalism projects**.
6. **Journalistic quality**, manifested through **compliance with ethical principles and public responsibility**, as well as through **internal media freedom guaranteed** by editorial statutes, is no longer merely a bonus in order to obtain additional funding but a **precondition** for being **eligible for funding**.
7. The funding system is **technologically neutral**. All channels can be funded if they meet the quality standards. Purely digital journalistic media are therefore also integrated into the new funding system.
8. It is necessary to develop **quality assurance**. A **coordinated system** instead of the current fragmentation, for example with significantly higher **funding for training and further education** through professional programmes and institutions, must continuously strengthen journalistic competence.
9. As part of quality assurance, it is necessary to **strengthen establishments for journalistic self-control (such as the Austrian Press Council), press clubs and other journalistic associations**, in accordance with their growing social responsibility and work tasks. There is a higher funding requirement for conveying **media competence** through institutions, educational projects and editorial programmes throughout Austria and with possibilities across all generations.
10. **Science and research** are the basis of quality assurance. They should regularly analyse the development of journalism, media economics and democratic discourses in Austria and publish them in the form of an **annual quality report**. A continuous **evaluation** of the success of the newly devised journalism funding for quality development is necessary.

In order to be able to meet the quality and sustainability requirements of journalism in accordance with these guidelines, in view of the difficult economic starting situation, the **funding budget** is to be significantly increased overall: from the previous (2025) around 80.8 million euros for media

funding (which would decrease after expiry of the Digital Transformation Funding – Digitale Transformationsförderung – 2027 to around 60 million) to 120.5 million, as proposed by the study as a higher funding budget.<sup>1</sup>

110 million of this is intended for journalism funding overall (see figure ES-1). All journalistic media enterprises that fulfil the following quality criteria are eligible for funding: **(1) Independence: transparent ownership situations and financing;** **(2) compliance with ethical directives and professional conduct;** **(3) professionalism: editorial structures, journalistic workforce and appropriate remuneration;** **(4) public interest: main journalistic purpose, accessibility and news character.**

Apart from this comprehensive, market-oriented journalism funding programme and its quality assurance, support is also provided for the digital transformation of providers of non-commercial, free broadcasting programmes, as well as for the development of infrastructure for common-good-oriented journalistic projects. It is recommended in this respect to increase the non-commercial broadcasting fund (Nichtkommerzieller Rundfunkfonds) from the current 6.25 million euros to 10 million euros. The low publishing funding (Publizistikförderung) should remain the same but should also become less bureaucratic. The budget for this is set at around 0.5 million euros.



**Figure ES-1: Journalism funding for all media types: quality criteria as a precondition.**

*Journalismusförderung (Journalism funding), Publizistikförderung (Publishing funding), Nichtkommerzieller Rundfunkfonds (Non-commercial broadcasting fund)*

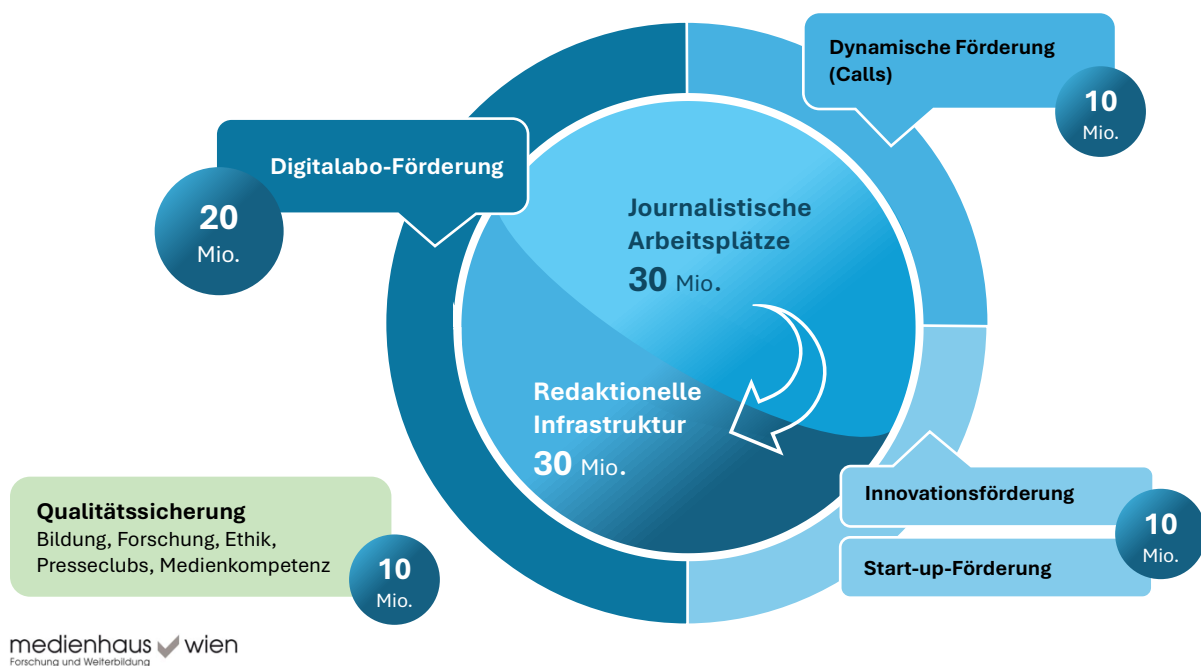
Source: own illustration. Graphics: Andreas Scharf

The increase in the funding budget can be cross-financed by significant savings in governmental advertisements, as recommended by the study, with regard to the federal budget. These “media cooperations” had increased strongly in recent years, as “indirect” funding with the risk of political dependence, without fair competition rules.

<sup>1</sup> The current funding budget of 14.5 million euros for the so-called TV fund (Fernsehfonds), which supports films, series and documentaries, is not taken account of in this.

The relevant new, additional funding for “comprehensive newspaper delivery” (“flächendeckende Zeitungszustellung”) and “funding for the access of young people to quality journalism” (“Förderung des Zugangs von jungen Menschen zum Qualitätsjournalismus”) set out additionally in the government programme of 2025 are not taken into account in the journalism funding model of the study, the analysis and calculation. Upon realisation, they would be an addition to the granting of funding in their own respective right.

Regarding the presented reform options, it is considered very important to ensure a careful transition from the previous media funding system to the new journalism funding system, as well as to keep costs for submissions as low as possible in future. One of the conditions for this will be the step-by-step transfer of all funding to the new integrative system, which sets out funding measures on various levels both for journalism and its infrastructure, as well as transformative and innovative projects (see figure ES-2).



**Figure ES-2: The convergent journalism funding and its components**

*Journalistische Arbeitsplätze (Journalistic workforce), Redaktionelle Infrastruktur (Editorial infrastructure), Innovationsförderung (Innovation funding), Start-up-Förderung (Start-up funding), Digitalabo-Förderung (Digital subscription funding), Dynamische Förderung (Dynamic funding), Qualitätssicherung – Bildung, Forschung, Ethik, Presseclubs, Medienkompetenz (Quality assurance – education, research, ethics, press clubs, media competence)*

Source: own illustration. Graphics: Andreas Scharf

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The reform plans essentially set out journalistic basic funding for journalistic workforce (30 million euros) and funding for the necessary editorial infrastructure (30 million euros), orientated respectively towards the verifiable human resources and structural requirements. In accordance with transparent formulas, journalistic positions are granted significantly higher funding than previously, with particular support also for small editorial offices in all media sectors. Instead of often untransparent funding decisions for hundreds of submitted individual programmes and projects in the past, the journalism funding returns the journalistic responsibility for content centrally to editorial offices and managements, which for them also means more planning security and less bureaucracy.

20 million euros of funding are earmarked for upgrading digital revenue models among the public and therefore developing them quicker, comprising subscriptions, community payments, membership models etc. A total of 10 million euros is allocated as funding for innovation projects in existing companies and for start-ups, which can be granted by the Funding Committee according to clear jury guidelines, as has been par for the course internationally for a while. A further 10 million euros are envisaged to be granted on the basis of evidence, according to social requirements and journalism development by the Funding Committee together with KommAustria. It can be assigned, for example, to the development of local journalism, cooperative journalistic AI projects or specialist areas such as science and culture journalism or investigative journalism.

## Granting funding: the independent Journalism Funding Committee

The consolidation of the various funding systems and responsibilities into a unified system is intended to enable fair granting according to objective criteria. Overall, this convergence serves the purpose of the equal treatment<sup>2</sup> of all funding recipients, as well as a uniform quality development to ensure the democratic role of journalism in the interests of the general public, which is also of key significance for matters concerning benefits and subsidies on a European level (Mitter 2023, 168–170).

A single **Journalism Funding Committee** is then responsible for decisions. It is of central importance that the absolute independence of such a committee is ensured beyond all doubt. The **members of the Journalism Funding Committee** are therefore to be nominated by an independent and competent selection senate comprising five experts independent of any party or government, after a call for applications and a transparent application procedure. The chair of the selection senate is ideally held by the President of the Constitutional Court (or a VfGH Supreme Constitutional Court member designated by them).

The Journalism Funding Committee is appointed optionally for up to 12 years (without the possibility of reappointment), but a minimum of 6 years (with the possibility of reappointment), decides on the basis of a simple majority and comprises:

- a Chairperson: an active or former member of the judiciary or a member or former member of a Supreme Court (OGH – Supreme Court of Justice, VwGH – Supreme Administrative Court, VfGH – Supreme Constitutional Court);
- a representative of KommAustria for the best possible inclusion of KommAustria expertise;
- 5 specialist members (and 5 substitute members) with different defined expertise, especially in media economics, law, journalism, digitisation, innovation.

In addition, further personal requirements are to be taken into consideration:

- at least 2, but a maximum of 3 of the 5 specialist members are non-Austrian experts (from the EU);
- of the 5 specialist members and the representative of KommAustria, at least 3 are female;
- The members of the commission are subject to strict independence and accountability

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<sup>2</sup> This plays a key role in a check pursuant to Art. 7 B-VG and Art. 20 GRC.

requirements.

In close **cooperation with RTR-GmbH**, which has already been responsible for the extensive preparatory and preliminary review tasks, the Journalism Funding Committee fulfils the **following tasks** in particular:

- checking the admissibility of funding applicants in accordance with the criteria that are preconditions for receiving funding;
- determining the extent of granted funding for the respective funding recipients;
- the definition and execution of specific funding calls, orientated towards international innovation trends and national requirements for the further development of journalism and the quality of democratic discourse;
- the appointment of assessors with specific knowledge of specialist areas, as support in the selection of innovation and start-up funding projects, as well as in the dynamic funding calls;
- commissioning the evaluation of funding success and devising options for the further development of programmes for evidence-based media policies;
- commissioning a both academically founded and practice-related annual “Report on the quality of the Public Sphere” for the general observation of the development of media diversity and journalism in Austria.

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