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Between Freedom and Fragility: What Kosovo Reveals About the Future of Media

By Jeton Mehmeti

Abstract: This article examines how structural pressures are reshaping journalism in Kosovo, a media system often regarded as legally strong but increasingly vulnerable in practice. Drawing on recent regional research, it analyzes shifts in media sustainability, political discourse, and digital transformation. The findings highlight growing tensions between legal protections and the realities of media production, including declining trust, economic fragility, and changing audience behavior. Kosovo’s experience provides broader insights into the challenges facing media systems in both emerging and established democracies.

Introduction

The state of media in Kosovo reflects a broader global pattern: systems that are formally free, yet increasingly constrained in their practical operation. While legal frameworks continue to guarantee freedom of expression, economic vulnerability, political pressure, and digital disruption are reshaping how media functions in practice. In this sense, Kosovo offers a revealing case of a wider trend affecting media systems across both emerging and established democracies.

Recent assessments by Reporters Without Borders illustrate this trajectory. Between 2022 and 2025, Kosovo moved from a classification of “problematic but improving” to “difficult and declining,” with notable deterioration in both political and economic indicators. This shift underscores a growing gap between formal guarantees of media freedom and the conditions necessary for independent and sustainable journalism.

This article draws on recent research on the future of media in Kosovo, conducted as part of a broader [regional study](#) covering the Western Balkans and Turkey. Combining [quantitative indicators](#) with [qualitative insights](#) from journalists, media professionals, and citizens, the research examines both structural trends and lived experiences within the media ecosystem. Across two complementary publications, the findings show that economic dependency, polarizing political rhetoric, and intensifying digital competition are progressively undermining journalistic autonomy and the quality of media content.



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The expanding media landscape

Press freedom is typically assessed across political, legal, economic, socio-cultural, and safety dimensions. Among these, Kosovo's legal framework has traditionally received the strongest evaluations in international reports such as Reporters Without Borders, IREX, and the European Commission. Following its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo had the opportunity to adopt a modern constitutional and legal framework aimed at protecting freedom of expression and media pluralism. This framework helped establish an environment generally supportive of media development.



Today, Kosovo operates through a dual system of regulation and self-regulation. The Independent Media Commission (IMC) oversees broadcast media, including radio and television, while online news media are largely self-regulated through the Kosovo Press Council.

This institutional framework has supported significant growth in the number of media outlets. Nearly 260 media outlets are licensed by the IMC, a sharp increase compared with a decade ago. The number of television channels has grown considerably, although only around 40 provide news content. The expansion of cable distribution has also encouraged the creation of new television channels, as media companies no longer depend solely on scarce terrestrial broadcasting frequencies.

Kosovo has also witnessed a substantial increase in online news media, although their exact number remains uncertain. Around 40 online outlets are currently members of the Kosovo Press Council. Given the linguistic diversity of Kosovo's media environment, this expansion has contributed to greater pluralism.

Changing media consumption and media literacy

Despite the rapid expansion of the media sector, television remains the [most frequently used](#) source of news and information in Kosovo. According to surveys by the International Republican Institute, television has consistently been the primary source of information for citizens over recent years. However, this dominance is gradually declining. Audience reach for television dropped from 82% in 2021 to 61% in 2024, indicating a significant shift in consumption patterns.



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At the same time, the use of social media as a source of news has increased substantially. Platforms such as Facebook (84%), Instagram (74%), and TikTok (14%) are becoming central to how information is accessed and shared. This transformation reflects broader global trends, where digital platforms increasingly shape public discourse and challenge traditional media's role as gatekeepers.

These shifts are also strongly generational. Younger audiences rely primarily on online news portals, social media platforms, and mobile applications for information, valuing speed, accessibility, and diversity of content. Older generations, by contrast, tend to follow a hybrid model, combining traditional television news with selective use of online sources. Both groups, however, recognize the decline of print media and the normalization of a "free information" culture, in which audiences expect unrestricted access to content without direct payment.

While access to information has expanded, this has not been matched by a corresponding increase in critical media engagement. On the contrary, available data suggest a decline in media literacy. According to the [Global Media Literacy Index](#) Kosovo was ranked in 40th place in a list of 41 countries, highlighting a growing gap between the availability of information and the public's ability to assess its credibility.

This divergence between increased access and reduced critical capacity presents a fundamental challenge for the media ecosystem. As audiences become more reliant on fast, personalized, and algorithm-driven content, the risk of misinformation, polarization, and declining trust in professional journalism becomes more pronounced.

Economic and political pressures on journalism

Kosovo journalists widely described 2025 as one of the most economically difficult years for the profession, marked by declining advertising revenues and the withdrawal of donor support. While direct censorship has become relatively rare, a more subtle form of pressure, often described as "economic censorship", has become increasingly influential.

In this context, financial vulnerability shapes editorial decisions, constrains critical reporting, and ultimately affects the quality of journalism.



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A key factor behind this shift is the erosion of traditional funding sources. The reduction of donor support has left many independent outlets without stable financial backing, particularly those engaged in investigative and public-interest reporting. At the same time, advertising revenues have declined sharply as local businesses increasingly redirect their marketing budgets to social media platforms, bypassing professional media organizations altogether. Faced with shrinking revenues, many media outlets are pushed toward more commercialized and click-driven content strategies, prioritizing audience metrics over editorial quality.

These economic pressures are compounded by a broader climate of political hostility and declining public trust in the media. Years of delegitimizing rhetoric from public officials have contributed to an environment in which journalism is increasingly questioned and contested. Journalists consistently reported that such discourse has normalized skepticism toward the media, making it easier for political actors to dismiss critical reporting as biased or politically motivated.

Recent data confirm this trend. According to the 2024 Balkan Barometer, public trust in the media fell sharply from 50% to 30%, representing the steepest decline compared to trust in government or parliament. While this erosion is partly driven by external pressures, it also reflects internal challenges within the media sector, including shortcomings in maintaining professional and ethical standards. At the same time, journalists face a deteriorating working environment. The Association of Journalists of Kosovo, a non-governmental organization representing more than 700 media professionals, has repeatedly highlighted a growing climate of online abuse and smear campaigns aimed at silencing critical voices.

One direct consequence of these trends is the declining attractiveness of journalism as a profession. In 2024 the University of Prishtina enrolled only 63 new journalism students, a sharp decline compared to 2021, when enrolment reached 135 students. This trend suggests a diminishing interest among younger generations in pursuing journalism as a career, raising serious questions about the long-term renewal and resilience of the profession.

A further notable trend reshaping Kosovo's media landscape is the rise of influencers and digital content creators, increasingly perceived as both an economic and cultural challenge to professional journalism. This shift not only undermines the financial sustainability of traditional media but also blurs the boundaries between journalism and entertainment, complicating public understanding of what constitutes credible information.



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Conclusion

Taken together, these trends point to a media system that is not only under pressure but undergoing a deeper structural transformation. Kosovo's media landscape, which is expansive, diverse, and legally protected, shows that formal freedom does not necessarily guarantee functional independence or sustainability.

The case of Kosovo illustrates how multiple challenges join to reshape journalism. Economic fragility, driven by declining advertising revenues and the withdrawal of donor support, limits the ability of media organizations to operate independently. Political rhetoric that delegitimizes journalism contributes to declining public trust, while digital platforms disrupt traditional business models and redefine how information is produced, distributed, and consumed. At the same time, the rise of influencers and personality-driven content challenges the authority of professional media and shifts trust away from institutions toward individuals.

Importantly, these developments are not unique to Kosovo. Rather, they reflect broader global dynamics affecting media systems across both emerging and consolidated democracies. However, the Kosovo case also underscores that these trends are inevitable. Strengthening enforcement of legal protections for journalists, ensuring transparency in public funding, investing in media literacy, and supporting sustainable and independent financing models are critical steps toward restoring trust and resilience in the media sector. In this sense, Kosovo represents not only a compressed version of global challenges, but also a test case for how coordinated action by institutions, media actors, and international partners can help safeguard the future of journalism in increasingly complex information environments.



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