**Alternatives – Media reforms for media integrity and future of independent journalism**

**Search for alternatives to corrupt media systems in the countries of South East Europe**

**SEE Media Observatory’s final regional conference**

**Novi Sad, 13 June 2016**

**Session:** **Alternative models of media funding – How to finance independent journalism and media**

**which serve public interest?**

**Speech by Ren**é **van Zanten,**

Director of the Dutch Journalism Fund, The Netherlands

Ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you very much for the invitation. I am very pleased to be here today and tell you about the things we do in the Netherlands to ensure that people are well informed about what is going on in their environment, their country and the world.  We think and discuss a lot about the role of journalism, because we see big changes in the ecosystem of news and information.

My name is René van Zanten, director of the Dutch Journalism Fund. We are an organization that is funded by the government. Not nearly enough of course, but with the little means we have, we try to be active in the field of innovation, knowledge and research.

In the Netherlands, we have no real discussion about the need for independent journalism. Journalism can only exist and be relevant if it is independent. This has been generally accepted in the Netherlands.

I come from a country with a long history of journalism. We have newspapers since the 17th century and, especially after WWII, almost everybody read a newspaper. In a country with around 14 million people, more than 4.5 million newspapers were sold every day. And then of course there were the free papers, radio and television.

This whole system has, as you know, been disrupted. The digital world offers great new opportunities for journalism to be better, but it also offers challenges, because journalism has to re-invent itself, has to find a new position in a world that is dominated by players like Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram. Today, everybody is a journalist, everybody is a publisher. Young people don’t read newspapers, don’t watch television, they watch YouTube, communicate on Facebook or similar platforms.

So, television is still popular, but the people who are watching are relatively old. Newspapers still exist, but circulation is going down rapidly (around half of the circulation in comparison with ten years ago) and advertisers find other ways of drawing attention. The new digital world offers great ways of finding and publishing news, but people are reluctant to pay for that. We are facing a world in transition.

That is where we are trying to help. It is important to say that the involvement of the Dutch government in this field is restricted to public television. Even there, nobody doubts that the independence of journalism is guaranteed. Even a hint of the government influence on public television stirs a massive public debate and would backfire immediately.

My organization is also completely independent, although we are financed by the government. We do not support companies, we support projects. So we have programs for innovation, for both legacy-companies and start-ups, for both mid-career professionals and students.

Of course, each of these groups requires a different approach. We had to learn all that when we started innovation programs five years ago. By then, people could just submit their application form and the board of the Fund would decide whether or not the project will be subsidized. And if they were subsidized, we would make an agreement about the length of the project, transfer them the money and hope for the best.

That’s not how we do it nowadays.

We have realized that giving money to start-ups differs from subsidizing a project initiated by a big publishing company. We have also realized that we should think of a way to help young people, students, to apply for a subsidy. Students of journalism schools have less chance of being employed within newsrooms than ten or twenty years ago. So, why not to start your own business then, provided you have a good idea and the skills to turn that into a success?

So we started a program called the Challenge. Ten masterclasses aimed at empowering young people with skills how to survive, showing them how their idea is maybe not so good idea at all, teaching them to accept that abandon their idea doesn’t matter, just they should come up with a better idea. And while they are at it, they should go and find out if people will use their idea. After that, they should figure out if this idea is going to generate enough money to make their living.

That’s all difficult stuff. It is scary to abandon an idea that you have been in love with for so long, to abandon an idea that all your friends like. But if you do the marshmallow test, and that’s one of the things they do during the Challenge, you find out this makes sense. I’m sure you now the test, but I will explain for the rest. Each team gets some uncooked spaghetti, some rope and a marshmallow. The team that builds the highest spaghetti tower with the marshmallow on top wins.

It is interesting to see that general managers from big companies fail to do this, while ten-year-old children make beautiful structures. All this is meant to show that people who are captured in structures don’t have the flexibility to alter their plan. From the moment they have a plan, everything is focussed on execution. While little children just come up with a new plan if the initial plan clearly does not work.

So, we try to help people to think their plan through, build a good team. We teach them to fail, to alter the plan or come up with something new. Don’t dwell on a plan that won’t fly. We use the well-known lean start-up method to do that. In the next step we will subsidize projects only to a certain point. For instance, the manufacturing of a minimal viable product. That should be enough to go to the market, find people who will finance your project, or will work with you in another capacity. We do not want to work with formats anymore. Every project has its own needs**,** every project is different.

We do all that because we think there is a very serious reason for innovation in the media business. Legacy companies should think of new ways of publicizing and get over hurdles such as history, culture and dreaming of the past. Journalists should get used to new circumstances. The old, familiar newsroom, with hundreds of people and lots of opportunities to make a brilliant career will diminish.

We have some proves to support this theory. As I told you, the Dutch Journalism Fund also does research. Recently, we initiated a study about scenarios for the future of media, news and journalism**.** We asked over a hundred people, mostly working in the media, to discuss about themes that are relevant for our future, to discuss about social developments. We asked them which of those themes are certain, predictable and which are not. We asked them to think their way to 2025.

We came up with two dominant uncertainties. The first one is the pace of technological development. Will we accept and use technology at the same rate as we did for the past ten years. It will go even faster or maybe will slow down. The other uncertainty is public trust. Will we trust institutions like Google, Facebook, Apple and Twitter?

This provides two axes. Technology and trust. So there are four scenarios.

* Reluctant in accepting technology and loosing trust in institutions. We call this scenario the Shire.
* Reluctant in accepting technology with plenty of trust in institutions, the big players. We call this scenario Darwin’s Game.
* The third one: Radical acceptance of technology, but loosing trust in institutions. We call that Wisdom of the Crowd;
* And the last one: full acceptance of technology and full trust in institutions. We call that A Handful of Apples.

We think this last scenario is more or less the situation today.

All these scenarios are available at our website [www.journalism2025.com](http://www.journalism2025.com)

Now, no matter which scenario you think is likely, or desired, the reason for publishing this study is to give you some tools to think about your own future. That is very easy to do. If you visit our website you will find the report, a summary, video of each of four scenarios, interviews and toolkits to see how this could help you to think about or rethink your own strategy. It doesn’t matter if you run a journalism school, a publishing company, a broadcasting station or maybe you are a freelance in journalism, this may help. Many companies and media organisations have already used this toolkit and adjusted their strategies. So please use this, it is free. If you can spare time, you can read the whole report, or if you are busy get a good picture of the scenarios in five minutes.

And I will tell you why you should take this very seriously. When we were discussing the scenarios, we put people from different backgrounds in one room: publishers, editors, representatives of the public and commercial parties. Normally, the discussions within such group would have lasted for about an hour before fighting would start and the police would have to interfere to establish law and order.

But not in this process. Everybody agreed. No matter where you work, it is common conclusion that media and journalism as a sector has a problem, so we all share that problem. We are in the process of hosting discussions that will help to find answers and solutions, and we hope that we can do this in the same atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding.

We acknowledged themes that we feel are important for shaping the future. These are themes like big data, privacy, diversity and the difference between the old and the new world. We must address those themes. This is no time to fight against each other, this is a time to join forces.

Thank you.