

Copenhagen, 26th of May 2025

European Democracy Shield - Open public consultation

Encyclopedias and The European democracy shield

The European Encyclopedia Network regards The European democracy shield as an important and necessary initiative to protect and to promote democracy in Europe.

We believe European encyclopedias can play an important role in the efforts to counter misinformation online, and to build societal resilience and trust in democratic institutions.

We urge the EU to

1. **mention the online encyclopedias role in knowledge preparedness in strategic documents, like The European democracy shield.**
2. **take into account online encyclopedias specific distribution methods and channels when regulating very large search engines (VLSE), by protecting intellectual property rights and implementing a must carry encyclopedia policy for VLSEs.**
3. **promote encyclopedias by establishing a grant editorially controlled encyclopedias, specially prioritizing a) small language states b) the restoration of encyclopedias and c) collaborative projects.**

Respectfully

On behalf of The European Encyclopedia Network

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Promoting encyclopedias role and recognition

European online encyclopedias play an important role in the information ecosystem and knowledge preparedness of the EU member states in three distinctive ways.

Firstly, encyclopedias provide citizens with reliable, verified and accessible information across all kinds of topics, science and technology, society and history, art and culture. Encyclopedias are a safe and trusted source, a common reference point in an information sphere struggling with information pollution.

Secondly, encyclopedias are large collaborative projects of experts from various fields, an important part of the knowledge ecosystem. At the same time they facilitate user participation. This way encyclopedias bridge and build trust between knowledge elites and society. They become knowledge commons.

Thirdly, encyclopedias play an important role in the preservation of national language and cultural identity. Encyclopedias are universal in values, structure and style but national in perspective, making them ideal for European collaborative effort for preservation of common democratic values and preservation of cultural heritage.

The importance of encyclopedias are evident for all schoolchildren looking up concepts in the encyclopedia - because concepts are the gateway to understanding all fields of knowledge. For the general public encyclopedias are taken for granted, they google, read it, and they don't necessarily know where the information is coming from. But when a crisis emerges, encyclopedias' role as societies knowledge preparedness become visible to all. Because encyclopedias already have articles on vaccines, Ukraine or tariffs, and we can immediately mobilize our standing collaborating experts to update relevant articles.

A recognition of the encyclopedias role as common reference point and part of societies knowledge preparedness would be important in strengthening encyclopedias position in the member states and making it easier to take into account encyclopedias regulatory needs.

Take encyclopedias into account when regulating

Encyclopedias reach audiences through very large search engines. For two decades this has worked out quite well for encyclopedias and VLSE. This distribution model is now in jeopardy, and we ask EU-regulators to take encyclopedias distribution model into account when regulating VLSE.

When Danish schoolchildren google the concept "democracy", they read the definition from the Danish National Encyclopedia, written by the renowned scholar Palle Svensson. In the same way Italians get results from Treccani, Slovaks find Beliana and Latvian students find the National Encyclopedia.

Up til now very large search engines have worked as distributors. Publishers, like encyclopedias, have competed in making the best content and being masters of search engine optimization (SEO). Now we see search engines implementing generative AI technology, transforming themselves from distributors to publishers, from search engines to answering machines, but without any contact with the knowledge ecosystem or any regard for intellectual property rights. Simultaneously chatbots are starting to take market shares and starting to become the preferred media for online search.

In recent years the EU has adopted new media regulation and established media support across online media. We would like to specifically highlight The European Media Freedom Act, protecting media pluralism and independence in the EU, and The Digital Services Act ensuring a safe and accountable online environment, both vital for our services.

Right now the media environment is changing rapidly. Very large search engines used to be a kind of collective transportation, getting you where you want on the internet, thereby working in collaboration with knowledge providers like us. Now they generate answers, using generative AI, which is trained on our material, thereby robbing the nation's knowledge system a cornerstone.

We believe access to verified and relevant information must be regulated like critical infrastructure – like electricity and transport. Information is crucial for business, research, education, public debate and for all individuals ability to make good decisions in their lives.

We ask that the EU take into account online encyclopedias specific distribution methods and channels when regulating very large search engines (VLSE), by protecting intellectual property rights and implementing a must carry encyclopedia policy for VLSEs.

Support editorially controlled encyclopedias through grants

Like other editorial controlled media encyclopedias need editorial staff and digital platforms (CMS). Several European encyclopedias are well staffed with a solid economy – financed publicly, through subscriptions or foundations. Some encyclopedias have quite small budgets or they have gone into hibernation.

The state of the European encyclopedias was outlined in an EU-report of 2018 called “Europe's online encyclopedias – Equal access to knowledge of general interest in a post-truth era”. An update of this report would be of great value for the european encyclopedias and could serve as preparation for establishing a grant for editorially controlled encyclopedias:

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/630347/EPRS_IDA\(2018\)630347_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2018/630347/EPRS_IDA(2018)630347_EN.pdf).

The European Encyclopedia Network believes that the EU and the member states have the responsibility to protect free speech as a positive right by enabling citizens to access basic and relevant information. EUs member countries have a strong tradition of public education, public service broadcasting and media regulation that ensure media pluralism.

We ask the EU to establish a grant for independent editorially controlled online encyclopedias, committing to the democratic and editorial values.

Suggestions for requirements for support

- Publication of editorially controlled online encyclopedias, understood as publications in the tradition of Encyclopedia Britannica, Brockhaus, Treccani and so forth.
- Editorial independence: Encyclopedias depend on trust. To ensure this trust, encyclopedias have to be editorially independent.
- Committing to a set of values: Like newspapers and TV-channels, encyclopedias can be controlled and manipulated by forces who don't share the ideals of human rights and liberal

democracy. Committing to these values should be a prerequisite for support by the European Democracy Shield.

- Cooperation: Encyclopedias have similar standards, formats and genres, at the same time they cater their content according to their language, tradition and cultural heritage, making them ideal for collaborative effort across the EU. Cooperation between encyclopedias would make the support more effective underscoring the collaborative effort of the Democracy Shield.

We suggest that as part of the European Democracy Shield there will be established a grant for editorially controlled encyclopedias, specially prioritizing a) small language states, b) the restoration of encyclopedias in hibernation and c) collaborative projects.

The European Encyclopedia Network

- Bulgaria Bulgarian Encyclopedia Scientific Information Centre (bas.bg)
- Denmark Foreningen lex.dk (lex.dk)
- Croatia The Miroslav Krleža Institute of Lexicography (lzmh.hr)
- Germany Brockhaus NE (brockhaus.de)
- Latvia National Encyclopedia (enciklopedija.lv)
- Lithuania Science and Encyclopedia Publishing Centre (meic.lt)
- Montenegro Centre of Lexicography (canu.me)
- Slovakia Encyclopaedic Institute of SAS (beliana.sav.sk)
- Sweden National Encyklopedia (ne.se)
- Italy Institute of Treccani Italian Encyclopedia (treccani.it)
- Norway Great Norwegian Encyclopedia (snl.no)
- Georgia Georgian Encyclopedia (encyclopedia.science.org.ge)
- Ukraine Great Ukrainian Encyklopedia (vue.gov.ua)