

## **World Press Freedom Day: 3 May 2019**

### **Background**

World Press Freedom Day takes place on 3 May each year. The day was established by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993 following a recommendation by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO). The recommendation was made in response to a call by African journalists who in 1991 had produced the Windhoek Declaration on media pluralism and independence.<sup>1</sup> The day aims to:

- celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom;
- evaluate press freedom around the world;
- defend the media from attacks on their independence; and
- pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession.<sup>2</sup>

UNESCO has argued that the day serves as a reminder that “in dozens of countries around the world, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists, editors and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered”.<sup>3</sup> It is also intended to act as a reminder to governments of the need to respect their commitment to press freedom and as an opportunity for media professionals to reflect on issues of press freedom and professional ethics.

In 2019, World Press Freedom Day is being jointly organised by UNESCO, the African Union Commission and the Government of the Federal Republic of Ethiopia.<sup>4</sup> The day will take place under the theme ‘Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation’, which aims to highlight the current challenges faced by the media in elections, along with the media’s potential in supporting peace and reconciliation processes.

### **State of International Media Freedom in 2018**

Compiled by Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF)), the World Press Freedom Index assesses the degree of freedom available to journalists in 180 countries.<sup>5</sup> The index uses an analysis of questionnaires answered by experts—such as media professionals, lawyers and sociologists—combined with data on abuses and acts of violence against journalists, to give a score to each country ranging from 0 to 100, with 0 being the best possible and 100 the worst. However, the methodology also prevents an inappropriately low score (high ranking) being given to a country where few or no acts of violence against journalists are reported because the provision of news and information is tightly controlled.

**Table 1: World Press Freedom Index Highest and Lowest Ranked Countries 2018<sup>6</sup>**

| 5 Highest Ranked Countries | 5 Lowest Ranked Countries | Selected Countries |
|----------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Norway                  | 176. China                | 15. Germany        |
| 2. Sweden                  | 177. Syria                | 33. France         |
| 3. Netherlands             | 178. Turkmenistan         | 40. United Kingdom |
| 4. Finland                 | 179. Eritrea              | 45. United States  |
| 5. Switzerland             | 180. North Korea          | 67. Japan          |

Analysis of the 2018 index by RSF has led to the claim that “the climate of hatred is steadily more visible in the Index”.<sup>7</sup> There have never been as many countries classed as ‘very bad’ (scored 55.01 to 100 points) on the index. Hostility towards the media from political leaders was found to be no longer limited to ‘authoritarian’ countries: instead RSF claimed that more ‘democratically’ elected leaders no longer see the media as part of democracy’s essential underpinning, but rather as an adversary to which “they openly display their aversion”. For example, the report highlighted that the US had fallen two places in 2018 to 45th under President Donald Trump, citing the President as a “media-bashing enthusiast” who has referred to reporters as “enemies of the people”. In 2018, the UK ranked 40th in the index with a score of 23.25.<sup>8</sup>

The line separating verbal violence from physical violence was also said to be “dissolving”.<sup>9</sup> The report stated that in the Philippines (ranked 133rd), the President, Rodrigo Duterte, “constantly insults reporters” and warned them that they “are not exempted from assassination”. In addition, verbal violence from politicians aimed at the media was reported to be on the rise in Europe. In the Czech Republic (ranked 34th), President Miloš Zeman had attended a press conference with a fake Kalashnikov inscribed with the words “for journalists”. Meanwhile, in Slovakia (ranked 27th) the Prime Minister, Robert Fico, referred to journalists as “filthy anti-Slovak prostitutes” and “idiotic hyenas”. Also in Slovakia, the reporter Ján Kuciak was shot dead at his home along with his fiancée in February 2018, following an investigation in which Mr Kuciak linked the Italian mafia to the City of London and Slovakian senior government advisors.<sup>10</sup> Frustrations regarding the Slovak Government’s reaction to the murders and the issues raised by Mr Kuciak’s investigation led to protests calling for justice and early elections. As a result, Prime Minister Fico and his cabinet resigned. Commenting on these trends, RSF Secretary-General Christophe Deloire stated:

The unleashing of hatred towards journalists is one of the worst threats to democracies [...] Political leaders who fuel loathing for reporters bear heavy responsibility because they undermine the concept of public debate based on facts instead of propaganda. To dispute the legitimacy of journalism today is to play with extremely dangerous political fire.<sup>11</sup>

Although Nordic countries continued to rank highly in 2018, they have also been affected by the overall decline. For example, Finland (ranked 4th) has fallen in the rankings for the second year running following a case which threatened the confidentiality of journalists’ sources. The home of the journalist Laura Halminen was searched after she reported in the Finnish newspaper Helsingin Sanomat that a Finnish military agency had been spying on Russia.<sup>12</sup> A court ruled, however, that despite the search the confidentiality of her sources had not been violated. The growing influence of ‘strongmen’ was also highlighted across countries, with Vladimir Putin’s Russia said to have “stifl[ed] independent voices at home” and extended “its propaganda network by means of media outlets such as RT [Russia Today] and Sputnik”. In addition, RSF claimed that China, under the leadership of President Xi Jinping, exported “its tightly controlled news and information model in Asia”, enabling other countries near the bottom of the index—including Vietnam, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan—to continue their suppression of criticism and

dissent. War was also described as turning countries into “news and information black holes”.<sup>13</sup>

Reporters Without Borders also record the number of journalists, citizen journalists and media assistants killed each year. In 2018, 65 journalists, 13 citizen journalists and five media assistants were killed.<sup>14</sup> So far in 2019, five journalists, one citizen journalist and one media assistant have been killed, with 167 journalists, 152 citizen journalists and 16 media assistants currently imprisoned.<sup>15</sup>

## **2019 Theme: ‘Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation’**

### ***Links Between the Media and Politics***

The importance of the media in elections has been highlighted by UNESCO: “election outcomes and their aftermath are critically affected by political discourse and communications, including the role of the media in relation to the polling process”.<sup>16</sup> However, focusing on the current state of journalism in relation to politics, UNESCO has stated that the contribution of free, pluralistic, independent and safe journalism is under “stress”. This has been caused by falling trust in established political parties and news outlets and is accompanied by polarising political discourse “that threatens peaceful elections as well as press freedom”. Attempts by political actors to control the media in elections have also been identified as complicating the role of journalism. In addition, growing disintermediation of news institutions, where politicians use channels other than the media to reach audiences directly, and with voters also sharing content amongst themselves, has been highlighted as an issue as it can lead to an “avalanche of content” during elections. UNESCO warned that this content is full of made-up facts, anti-media rhetoric and attempts to discredit truthful news reports and can leave the visibility and impact of professional journalism potentially diminished.

### ***Role of the Internet and Social Media***

The “growing centrality of the internet during elections” has also been highlighted.<sup>17</sup> Although UNESCO states that attempts to control election coverage, both online and offline, are not a new trend, the body notes that these efforts are now being complemented by the use of social media and social messaging to bypass, as well as undercut, the credibility of professional reporting.<sup>18</sup> These changes have also come at a time when the internet has become the main site of political discussion for many people and the main platform through which to obtain information. This move away from traditional media has been highlighted by Reuters, which found that in 2018 the proportion of adults in the UK consuming news online (74%) exceeded those who watched news on the TV (66%), accessed news through social media (39%) or read news in print (36%).<sup>19</sup>

Issues of funding have also been highlighted by UNESCO, which has argued that while there is an expectation for media outlets to constantly provide journalistic content online, many people prefer not to pay for it: for example, Reuters have found that of those who got their news online, fewer than 1 in 10 (7%) paid for the content. This puts a strain on the quality and professionalism of reporting, with “well-researched political analysis” displaced by content that is cheaper and more opinion-based.<sup>20</sup> Combined with social media’s prioritisation of “passions like fear and anger”, these trends can encourage voting based on attitudes, rather than an assessment of political merits. Further to this, the *Economist* has argued that recent media trends have shown that outrage is the message that will “fly off the shelves”.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, research associates at the US National Bureau of Economic Research, have considered the reach of social media. They stated that content can be relayed among users without significant third-party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgement, but can still in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN or the *New York Times*.<sup>22</sup>

The role of algorithms that give priority to emotive content, driving ‘viral’ material at the expense of rational and fact-based political arguments, has also been discussed.<sup>23</sup> UNESCO has argued that constant exposure to “a mass of emotive content driven by attention-economics and psychological intelligence” can lead to individuals being both polarised and paralysed by “information overload”. Responding to this, some people resort to ‘easy answers’, such as adopting conspiracy theories, treating all information as equally unreliable or putting “blind trust” in information sourced from close friends or a populist leader. For others, UNESCO state that cynicism and apathy take the place of healthy scepticism and active citizenship.

### **‘Fake News’**

Concerns have also been raised around the term ‘fake news’. UNESCO has argued that by using the term ‘news’, it is understood that the information is verifiable and in the public interest, whereas ‘fake news’ does not meet these standards and “does not deserve the label of news”.<sup>24</sup> In this context ‘fake news’ becomes an oxymoron, which undermines the credibility of information which meets the standards and is ‘real news’. In addition, the charity Full Fact has argued that the term ‘fake news’ should not be used to refer to the problems associated with misinformation and disinformation as it has been “effectively weaponised and subsequently made redundant by politicians and media across the globe using it as a means of dismissing inconvenient dissent”.<sup>25</sup>

Exploring the public’s awareness of the problem, research has shown that although people are aware of disinformation and fake news, the public’s ability to identify it remains an issue. A survey in the US in 2016 found that 64% of people believed that fake news caused “a great deal of confusion about current issues and events”.<sup>26</sup> Yet 39% said they were very confident that they could recognise fake news. However, a 2017 survey by Channel 4 found that only 4% of people correctly identified true and false stories. OFCOM has also reported that 21% of adults think that if a website has been listed by a search engine, it will provide accurate, unbiased information, with 27% of 12- to 15-year-olds assuming that they can trust a website returned by a Google search. It has also been found that people are more likely to believe a false claim if it is repeated, even if it contradicts prior knowledge.

### **International Response**

UNESCO has argued that responses by some commentators to these issues have included calls for better self-regulation by internet companies, in addition to forms of state and multi-stakeholder regulation.<sup>27</sup> In terms of state intervention, UNESCO reported some governments have responded by increasing internet shutdowns, as well as the blocking and filtering of online content and curbing access to communications and content in times of polls. Going forward, it has asserted:

It is key to keep focus on a free, independent and pluralistic media, with professional journalism that is practiced without fear of attack. Ensuring diversity of content in media programming, and access to such diversity for all groups in society, is also fundamental.<sup>28</sup>

To support this, UNESCO has published a handbook aimed at journalists, entitled, *Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation*.<sup>29</sup> The purpose of the handbook is to provide an internationally relevant model curriculum “which responds to the emerging global problem of disinformation that confronts societies in general and journalism in particular”.<sup>30</sup>

However, the UN Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, David Kaye, has warned that efforts to counter the issues could lead to censorship:

“Fake news” has emerged as a global topic of concern and there is a risk that efforts to counter it could lead to censorship, the suppression of critical thinking and other approaches contrary to human rights law.<sup>31</sup>

Index on Censorship has raised similar concerns, stating that it is vital that “any new system created for regulating social media protects freedom of expression, rather than introducing new restrictions on speech by the back door”.<sup>32</sup>

Responding to criticism on the issue, social media companies have argued that they are technology companies rather than media companies as they do not generate or alter content and do not wish to be seen as “arbiters of truth”.<sup>33</sup> However, the industry has taken action on fake news. For example, it was announced in January 2019 that Facebook users will be able to report posts they think may be inaccurate and the charity Full Fact will rate them based on their accuracy.<sup>34</sup> If the content is proven to be false, it will appear lower on Facebook’s news feed, but will not be deleted.

### **Domestic Response**

The House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has also highlighted the impact of social media on elections:

Among the countless innocuous postings of celebrations and holiday snaps, some malicious forces use Facebook to threaten and harass others, to publish revenge porn, to disseminate hate speech and propaganda of all kinds, and to influence elections and democratic processes—much of which Facebook, and other social media companies, are either unable or unwilling to prevent.<sup>35</sup>

To tackle these issues, the committee emphasised the need for a democracy to include a plurality of voices, as well as the skills, experience and knowledge to gauge the veracity of the voices which provide information.<sup>36</sup> It also acknowledged that the internet functions on a scale and at a speed that is unprecedented in human history. The committee argued that, in the face of these issues, “big tech companies must not be allowed to expand exponentially, without constraint or proper regulatory oversight”. It claimed that the legislative tools to tackle the problems already exist, but now must be applied to digital activity. The committee called for:

- A compulsory Code of Ethics for tech companies overseen by an independent regulator.
- The regulator to be given powers to launch legal action against companies breaching code.
- Government to reform current electoral communications laws and rules on overseas involvement in UK elections.
- Obligations for social media companies obliged to take down known sources of harmful content, including proven sources of disinformation.<sup>37</sup>

In 2018, the Electoral Commission commissioned research on public perspectives of political finance regulation and digital campaigning.<sup>38</sup> The research included a focus on reactions to election and referendum campaign materials in the UK received digitally and accessed online. It found that participants were concerned about the potential reach of fake news, as well as the speed at which it can influence people who access it online. Responding to these concerns, the participants agreed that the

source should take responsibility for ensuring news was not fake.

Full Fact has also considered the concerns raised regarding fake news. It has argued that while immediate action is needed to tackle some urgent problems—“notably our outdated election law”—rushing to come up with quick solutions to a range of issues “could do more harm than good”.<sup>39</sup> Instead, it has asserted that a wider understanding of the issues and effective and proportionate solutions are required. Linked to these concerns, Full Fact has published a framework for a “risk-based and proportionate response” to the problems of misinformation and disinformation in the UK. It includes recommendations to: update election law to improve transparency; build resilience through strong public institutions; and future proof misinformation policy.<sup>40</sup>

### **Press Freedom: Domestic Situation and Government Policy**

Commenting on the UK’s place at number 40 in the World Press Freedom Index, RSF stated that “a heavy handed approach towards the press (often in the name of national security) has resulted in the UK keeping its status as one of the worst-ranked Western European countries in the World Press Freedom Index”.<sup>41</sup> Other issues raised by RSF included: the implementation of the Investigatory Powers Act 2016 (including a framework to govern the use and oversight of investigatory powers by law enforcement and the security and intelligence agencies<sup>42</sup>); the former Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, “repeatedly threaten[ing]” to restrict encryption tools such as WhatsApp; and the abuse received by journalists, such as the BBC’s Laura Kuenssberg, who had received extensive online abuse and threats resulting in her needing bodyguards to cover the Labour Party conference.

Writing in the *Evening Standard* in November 2018, the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Jeremy Hunt, argued that defending a free media must be a central element of British foreign policy, and highlighted the number of journalists murdered or imprisoned overseas.<sup>43</sup> Mr Hunt also outlined the links between a free media, good governance and defeating corruption: “hard evidence shows a striking overlap between the countries with the least corruption and the countries with the freest media”. He announced that in 2019 he would host an international conference in London on the issue of media freedom:

My aim is to bring together the countries which believe in this cause in order to mobilise a consensus behind the protection of journalists. Britain will be a chain that links the nations who share our values. We cannot physically prevent journalists from being locked up in other countries. But if governments choose to jail them without good reason, we can alert global public opinion and impose a diplomatic price.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, Mr Hunt cited work undertaken by the Government and British embassies to support media freedom worldwide.<sup>45</sup> He announced £8.5 million of funding for “essential work” in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to help Britain “lead the struggle against propaganda and the misuse of the internet”, and expressed concerns with the findings of a recent report about media freedoms “and the deteriorating situation for journalists in China”.<sup>46</sup> The issue of disinformation was also raised:

In the era of fake news and concerted propaganda by hostile states, supporting a free media also means countering the incoming tides of disinformation. While it has never been easier to publish and receive information, it has also never been easier to spread lies and conspiracy theories. Social media offers a malign opportunity to whip up hatred and incite violence against vulnerable minorities.<sup>47</sup>

## Further Information

- House of Lords Library, [Fake News](#), 25 April 2017
- Samuel C Woolley and Philip N Howard, [Computational Propaganda: Political Parties, Politicians, and Political Manipulation on Social Media](#), 2019
- Alan Rusbridger, [Breaking News: The Remaking of Journalism and Why It Matters Now](#), 2018

<sup>1</sup> UNESCO, [World Press Freedom Day](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [2018 World Press Freedom Index: Detailed Methodology](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [2018 World Press Freedom Index: Ranking 2018](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [RSF Index 2018: Hatred of Journalism Threatens Democracies](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [2018 World Press Freedom Index: Ranking 2018](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [RSF Index 2018: Hatred of Journalism Threatens Democracies](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Soraya Sarhaddi Nelson, [Slovakia Government's Collapse Not Enough to End Protests Over Journalist's Murder](#), National Public Radio, 20 March 2018; and Andrew Hosken, [The Mafia Murders That Brought Down Slovakia's Government](#), BBC News, 22 July 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [RSF Index 2018: Hatred of Journalism Threatens Democracies](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [Finland](#), accessed 27 February 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [RSF Index 2018: Hatred of Journalism Threatens Democracies](#), accessed 25 February 2019.

<sup>14</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [Violations of Press Freedom Barometer: The Figures in 2018](#), accessed 28 February 2019.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> UNESCO, [World Press Freedom Day 2019: Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation](#), 2019, p 2.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p 3.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p 4.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, [Digital News Report 2018](#), 2018, pp 62–3.

<sup>20</sup> UNESCO, [World Press Freedom Day 2019: Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation](#), 2019, p 4; and Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, [Digital News Report 2018](#), 2018, pp 62–3.

<sup>21</sup> *Economist* (£), [The Business of Outrage](#), 15 October 2016.

<sup>22</sup> Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, [Social Media and Fake News in the 2016](#), *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 2017, vol 31 no 2, p 211.

<sup>23</sup> UNESCO, [World Press Freedom Day 2019: Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation](#), 2019, pp 3–4.

<sup>24</sup> UNESCO, [Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training](#), 2018, p 7.

<sup>25</sup> Full Fact, [Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society](#), 2018, p 2.

<sup>26</sup> POST, [Online Information and Fake News](#), July 2017, p 3.

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO, [World Press Freedom Day 2019: Media for Democracy: Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation](#), 2019, p 3.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> UNESCO, [Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation: Handbook for Journalism Education and Training](#), 2018.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p 7.

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, [Freedom of Expression Monitors Issue Joint Declaration on 'Fake News', Disinformation and Propaganda](#), 3 March 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Index on Censorship, [Wider Definition of Harm can be Manipulated to Restrict Media Freedom](#), 18 February 2019.

<sup>33</sup> POST, [Online Information and Fake News](#), July 2017, p 4.

<sup>34</sup> Metro, [Facebook Launches UK Fact-Checking Initiative to Tackle Fake News](#), 11 January 2019.

<sup>35</sup> House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, [Disinformation and 'Fake News': Final Report](#), 18 February 2019, HC 1791 of session 2017–19, p 5.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, pp 5–6

- <sup>37</sup> UK Parliament, '[Disinformation and 'Fake News': Final Report Published](#)', 18 February 2019.
- <sup>38</sup> Electoral Commission, *Political Finance Regulation and Digital Campaigning: A Public Perspective*, 24 April 2018, pp 4–5.
- <sup>39</sup> Full Fact, *Tackling Misinformation in an Open Society*, 2018, p 1.
- <sup>40</sup> *ibid*, p 31.
- <sup>41</sup> Reporters Without Borders, '[United Kingdom](#)', accessed 28 February 2019.
- <sup>42</sup> Home Office, '[Investigatory Powers Act](#)', 1 March 2016.
- <sup>43</sup> Jeremy Hunt, '[Britain Champions Free Speech, So We're Leading the War on Fake News](#)', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1 November 2018.
- <sup>44</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>45</sup> *ibid*.
- <sup>46</sup> Foreign and Commonwealth Office, '[Foreign Secretary Concerned by Report on Media Freedoms in China](#)', 29 January 2019; and Foreign Correspondents' Club of China, *Under Watch: Reporting in China's Surveillance State*, 2018.
- <sup>47</sup> Jeremy Hunt, '[Britain Champions Free Speech, So We're Leading the War on Fake News](#)', Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 1 November 2018.

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