



PRESS RELEASE

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World Press Freedom Day 2015: Let Journalism Thrive! Towards Better Reporting, Gender Equality, & Media Safety in the Digital Age

Free and independent journalism and quality reporting, in the context of digital age is vital for promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development

Islamabad, 4 May 2015: To mark the celebrations of 2015 World Press Freedom Day (WPFDD), UNESCO Islamabad in collaboration with Media House organized a debate on “Towards Better Reporting”. The debate aimed to discuss the issues of freedom of expression and press freedom in Pakistan by highlighting media concentration impacts on media’s role, hate-speech and self-regulations, challenges to investigative journalism and Media and Information Literacy.

Keeping in view the large number of Urdu audience in Pakistan, UNESCO Islamabad is organizing the event with editors and producers of leading Urdu print and electronic media to discuss on how to improve the quality of journalism in the country for the benefit of all.

Vibeke Jensen, Representative/ Director UNESCO Islamabad in her opening remarks highlighted the importance of the World Press Freedom Day and this year’s theme “Better Reporting”. She emphasized that media can play a significant role in promoting peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. She said the major function of media organizations is to provide **quality** information and access to a wide range of perspectives and opinions. She further added that the media has a very important task in promoting democracy and that the most important duty of the journalists is to report the news fully and responsibly.

She concluded that today’s debate with Urdu media editors and producers is to provide an opportunity to discuss the issue of freedom of expression and press freedom in Pakistan, enhancing quality of reporting, media self regulations and editorial policies in order to provide the audience with reliable, quality and accurate information.

Renowned journalist and Former Chief-Editor, Express Tribune, Muhammad Ziauddin, while speaking on the issue of ethical standards in digital age said that ethical standard is a prolong process which itself establishes with the passage of time. However, personal ethical values are important for conducting and promoting quality and credible journalism.

He stressed that journalists must prove their integrity before their audience in broadcast media. He added that journalists shall not only follow the written codes of ethics but they shall also develop it within their personalities. He pointed out that print media comprised of various gate keepers who check the authenticity of the news items, however, in broadcasting, the news items are aired immediately without complete verification. He said the media outlets and senior journalists shall adopt media ethical codes and also need to train the young journalists about media ethics in order to enhance editorial polices and quality reporting and self regulations.

Speaking on the importance of Media and Information literacy, Dr. Syed Abdul Siraj, Chairman, Department of Mass Communication AIOU said that today’s world is ruled by information. He said that digital media has provided easy access to information and knowledge. He also explained the digital divide within the perspective of post modernism and the opportunities created by the rise of electronic mass media.

Hanif Khalid, Editor Daily Jhang, emphasized that journalism profession requires true and honest people to broadcast accurate, true and impartial news to the audience/readership. He said that most of the developed countries have ensured freedom of mass media; however in Pakistan there is still a long way to ensure the same.

He pointed out that media censorship is a black law that has witnessed many repercussions in the past. He emphasized that responsible journalism is solution to most of the problems in Pakistan.

Speaking on the self regulations/hate speech, Senior Anchor, News One, Nadia Mirza said setting up a regulatory board for live television shows is important to avoid broadcasting hate speeches and ensure quality journalism. She mentioned that PEMRA shall play its dual role on the issue of hate speeches. She said that media has given much awareness to youth to keep a check on the credibility of journalists as well as journalism. She also explained that media attitude is crucial towards quality journalism in broadcast media which unfortunately is lacking in most of the electronic medium as compared to print media.

More Information on Sub Them-1, “Better Reporting and Independent Journalism in the Digital Age”

In some ways, the digital age has helped move us closer to the goals of independent, free, and pluralistic media environment as stated in the landmark Windhoek Declaration of 1991 which is also the origin of WPFD. On the flip side, the ease of individual publishing has also created more fragmented audiences, more partisan reporting and uneven standards of accuracy, and verification amongst the array of actors now contributing to journalism. In many instances, the proliferation of online news is being met with increased blocking, filtering, and licensing or registration requirements for those wishing to publish.

Today, there is also the specter of private censorship, and privatized censorship through Internet intermediary companies. Although businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights, the Internet intermediary companies do not always uphold online freedom of expression in operating across a range of jurisdictions, circumstances, technologies, and business models.

The growing influence of commercialization and concentration of media enterprise ownership, often in a way that lacks transparency, also impacts upon the independence and quality of journalism on all platforms. Studies have found that governments and politicians continue to have too much influence over who owns, operates and regulates the media and that many media markets continue to exist with monopolistic practices, corruption, or untransparent methods. As a result, the public is given only the same limited number of ideas, views, and facts that are repackaged and recycled. In this context, self-regulation can provide a defence for the integrity of journalism, but it is uneven. Furthermore, it exists today in juxtaposition to systems operated by Internet intermediary companies which do not come from a freedom of expression background, and it is unclear which sector has the optimum model for self-regulation.

All these features add up to pressure on independent journalism and on its quality. While there is no universal set of criteria for quality journalism, the subject can be assessed in terms of adherence to professional standards and integrity, including the independence of the journalism in service of public interest. Indicators of such quality may possibly be numbers of awards, audience share, the resources available for newsroom, audience responses and participation, and self-assessments. What is clear, however, is that investigative journalism, in particular, relies on the qualities of accurate, verified, in-depth, and critical reporting on matters of special public concern. This is work which often requires long and difficult research to bring key information to light. The business basis for such quality journalism is increasingly coming under stress.

The issue of better news reporting is also being challenged by complexities in the reporting on hate and hate speech. Compounding this are user-generated comments, whereby hatred is being expressed directly on the media's platforms, often bypassing any editorial process. Deleting this kind of speech may drive those who espouse it into echo-chambers elsewhere online where these individuals or groups can express their views without challenge. At the same time, allowing such content to remain online in the interests of playing the role of a public sphere may alienate other parts of the audience, and it may also violate laws on hate. These challenges point to the need for media policies to maintain a quality and professional role in the face of hate.

More and more it is becoming evident that quality and independent journalism needs to be paralleled by the empowerment of users of digital communications. Such users need to know their rights online, and how to be

ethically-reflective in their digital engagements. How to recognize online rumour, and how to find and identify verified news content are additional skills needed for the digital era. How to self-protect against viruses on the one hand, and on the other, how to combat online hate speech, cyber-bullying and digital defamation are other capacities needed. In this regard, Media and Information Literacy (MIL) is crucial in enhancing users' critical thinking skills and fosters an enabling environment for quality-driven reporting. However, schooling systems have been slow to integrate MIL into their curricula.

All the points above impact significantly on the potential role of media in regard to sustainable development. To contribute to peaceful, accountable and inclusive societies, there is a need to address online freedom of expression, media pluralism, self-regulation, the business model for quality journalism, investigative journalism, online hate-speech and MIL.

Questions:

- What are the new ways to maintain editorial standards in the digital age?
- What can be done to verify accuracy in journalism?
- How to ensure quality journalism amongst social media producers of news?
- How useful are the so-called 'transparency reports' issued by Internet intermediaries?
- Are international and national laws and media policy adequately addressing the power of intermediaries to support press freedom and avoid blocking legitimate news media content?
- What are the impacts of media concentration and commercialization on the editorial independence of editors and of journalists?
- What business model can support quality journalism, and how to reinforce investigative journalism in particular?
- Can media and Internet self-regulation systems learn anything from each other, and how can standards be raised that will protect and promote online journalism at the same time as providing accountable redress to persons concerned with apparent violations of their rights?
- What are the good practices in reporting hate, and dealing with user contents that are hateful?
- Can Media and Information Literacy indirectly help to strengthen independent and quality journalism?
- What needs to be done to get the composite package of Media and Information Literacy skills into the education system?

UNESCO is the sole UN specialized agency with a mandate to defend and promote freedom of expression and press freedom worldwide.

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