

World Press Freedom Day 2019

Media for Democracy

Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation

Global Conference
Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
1-3 May 2019

On 3 May 2019, UNESCO will celebrate the 26th edition of the celebration of World Press Freedom Day in almost 100 countries. The worldwide commemoration theme concerns the current challenges faced by the media in times of elections and the growing prevalence of disinformation, along with the media's potential in supporting democracy, peace and reconciliation.

The global conference event takes place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and is jointly organized by UNESCO, the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the African Union Commission. It is hosted in the African Union Headquarters. The 2019 theme is closely interlinked with the objectives of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which seeks to promote "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law".

In this respect, Agenda 2063 has earmarked, under its Aspiration 3, a specific goal on "Democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rule of law entrenched". The goal has also identified that democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rule of law are entrenched as one of its priority areas to be realized by 2023. This is through ensuring that at least 70% of the people perceive the press and exchange of information is free and the freedom of expression prevails.

Media, Democracy and Peace

This celebration embraces both Article 19 and Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by championing the right to freedom of opinion and expression and echoing the importance of the will of the people to be expressed in periodic and genuine elections by universal and equal suffrage. These two rights – to elections and to expression – come into play during polls, and call attention to their linkage.

Today, the contribution of free, pluralistic, independent and safe journalism to democracy is under unprecedented stress. Also, 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.

Many societies have falling trust in established political parties and in news outlets themselves. This is often accompanied by polarizing political discourse that threatens peaceful elections as well as press freedom.

As recognized in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, peace and democracy are preconditions for equitable and sustainable development. When freedom of expression and safety of journalists are protected, the media can play a vital role in preventing conflict and in supporting peaceful democratic processes. These outcomes are conditions for the realization of Africa's Agenda 2063 which envisages a peaceful and secure continent, and which calls for "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law".

The SDGs themselves encapsulate media's potential to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies. SDG Target 16.10 urges UN Member States to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements". The two indicators to follow progress under Target 16.10 cover the safety of journalists and the legal and political guarantees to access information. These indicators show that under the United Nations' agenda for sustainable development, the institutions of a free and safe press are able to access and disseminate information of public.



For more information, visit:
en.unesco.org/commemorations/orldpressfreedomday
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In this context, World Press Freedom Day 2019 will address the following sub-themes:

1. How the digital era is affecting electoral communications - and how this impacts on existing policies and regulations for elections and for communications related to the Internet;

Points to ponder:

- *How can professional journalism play a more visible and distinctive role, and compete with emotive content, disinformation and private messaging during elections?*
- *How can transparency and the Right to Information be strengthened in relation to elections?*
- *In the new digital era, how should press freedom and electoral regulation apply to Internet companies, media institutions and the governance of the Internet more widely?*
- *What are the risks of new technologies for communications during elections, and are there ways the media could harness these tools for improved electoral reporting?*

2. New attempts to undermine media's role in democracy: Discrediting professional journalism, and disrupting Internet access;

Points to ponder:

- *What can be done to counter rhetorical attacks on journalism?*
- *How can the monitoring of threats and attacks on journalists during elections be formalized and institutionalized?*
- *How can we strengthen implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, in times of elections?*
- *What are the risks and limits of regulatory responses as methods to counter disinformation?*
- *What can journalists and fact-checking initiatives do in order to counter disinformation and uphold fact-based political debate?*
- *What partnerships are possible so as to raise media and information literacy around elections?*
- *At what point do Internet disruptions compromise the integrity of an election to the extent that the exercise is fundamentally flawed?*
- *What arguments and steps can help to push back against Internet disruptions and data taxes, particularly during polls?*

3. Media's potential to contribute to a culture of sustainable peace and democracy.

Points to ponder:

- *In a polarized context, how can media with different political leanings come together such as in a voluntary electoral code of coverage that defends against capture, upholds professional standards and eschews incitement?*
- *Can social media business models be re-engineered to reduce the ramping up of emotions, and avoid filter-bubbles and disinformation, which can be factors in elections becoming engines of conflict rather than peace?*
- *How can electoral management bodies support free, impartial and professional journalism, and journalistic safety, during a poll - while also avoiding prescriptions that could intrude on press freedom?*
- *How can media professionals and cultural actors work together to raise awareness of their work to enable citizens to make informed decisions and to address the challenges that restrict their rights to freedom of expression, artistic freedom and creative expression?*

Conclusion

Informed citizens, who understand the current complex global political environment, are likely to feel more empowered to exercise their democratic rights and accept outcomes of free and fair elections. Free, independent and professional journalism - both online and offline - serves an essential role in democracies. It can also hold the powerful to account for the integrity, peace and fairness of an election. Journalism can also contribute to the electoral agenda by requiring politicians to respond to the public, and to focus on subjects of real public interest. In reconciliation processes, conflict-sensitive journalism can play a pivotal role. It can bridge divides through accurate reporting, break down stereotypes, cover human stories and present solutions. Such journalism can help prevent polarization, violence and war.

Journalism can also be a beacon in a storm of information where unchecked lies are disseminated and emotions are whipped up to the detriment of a culture of peaceful conflict resolution.

World Press Freedom Day 2019 is a major opportunity to advance the agenda of deepening democracy and sustainable development in digital times.