

High-Level Dialogue on Press Freedom and Tackling Disinformation in the COVID-19 Context, 4 May 2020

Summary of discussions

The High-Level Dialogue, which was viewed by over 85,000 people on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, was opened by UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay, who highlighted the vital nature of free, professional and independent journalism in order to overcome the current COVID-19 pandemic. The Director-General's address shed light on the role the media can play to combat rampant disinformation: she described journalism as **“a way of piercing through the fog of fake news which amplify the crisis”**. The Director-General also discussed current threats to journalists' safety such as restrictions, harassment (particularly in the case of women journalists) and loss of revenue. To face these challenges, Azoulay called for more commitment by national authorities, large Internet companies and citizens to value and defend the service rendered to society by the press.

« To keep us informed, journalists in the field sometimes risk their lives and this is also a time to express our gratitude and say thanks to them, because they are the ones at the frontline of this crisis. Their profession is crucial and yet, in many countries, they're not appreciated » - Audrey Azoulay, UNESCO Director-General

The UNESCO Director-General's welcoming remarks were followed by an address by United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. He stressed the importance of marking World Press Freedom Day yearly, describing it as an important moment to focus on freedom of the media and protection of journalists, a cause which the Secretary-General believes “remains essential”. The Secretary-General recalled his personal experience as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, stating **“I've seen journalists risk their lives to make sure people' stories are heard. I could not do my job without the courageous, creative and often deeply moving work of the media”**. Guterres then proceeded to underline the many challenges faced by media workers such as threats, violence and killings, and praised the courage and commitment of 2020 UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize laureate Jineth Bedoya.

Secretary-General Guterres also addressed the dangers of disinformation, which spreads harmful false claims, hate speech and conspiracies at alarming speed, and which can only be remedied by **“fact-based news analysis, independent reporting, and journalism without fear or favour”**. The Secretary-General, like the UNESCO Director-General before him, called for more commitments and more accountability from political leaders, and welcomed recent commitments by online platforms to fight disinformation.

« When journalists are attacked, societies as a whole pay a price. No democracy can function without press freedom, which is the cornerstone of trust between people and their institutions » - United Nations Secretary-General, António Guterres

Following these remarks, moderator Jorge Ramos proceeded to open the discussions on the topic of disinformation and the current “disinfodemic”. UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay stressed

how vital independence of the media is at all times, but particularly now: **“The first casualty of war is truth, and the same could be said in the context of the pandemic”**. The Director-General further added that the principle of accountability that applies to the media should also apply to digital players, and that accountability for what one publishes becomes particularly important as online platforms develop into major sources of information.

Maria Ressa, investigative journalist and co-founder of Rappler, reinforced this point, stating that **“This is a time when lies can kill”** and that **“More than at any other time, we’ve been talking about how social media has been taking away the gatekeeping power that journalists used to have. When lies spread faster than facts [on social media], we need to have clear, concrete measures”**.

Monika Bickert, Vice-President for Policy & Content at Facebook, distinguished two kinds of “fake news” by separating “misinformation”, which is shared without knowledge that it contains false information, and “disinformation”, which is shared with ill intent and sometimes financially motivated and coordinated.

« This [disinfodemic] is like environmental pollution. We have an ecosystem which is polluted, we need to find ways to unpollute it. To unpollute small bits of it isn’t enough - we need everyone to be committed and on board. »

– Christophe Deloire, Secretary-General of Reporters Without Borders

On the topic of governmental restrictions, François-Philippe Champagne, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada and Co-Chair of the Media Freedom Coalition, denounced abuses by some actors misusing measures to mitigate the spread of the virus in order to stifle freedom of expression.

The High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet urged that the response to this crisis must be human rights-based. She underlined the importance of access to information in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. She explained that while certain restrictions are possible according to international law, these had to be necessary, proportionate and legitimate.

The High Commissioner also recalled that, thanks to innovative reporting by journalists in these times of crisis, the general public has not only been able to access reliable facts, but has also been able **“to see the human faces of the pandemic, their suffering, and their heroism”**.

Moderator Jorge Ramos then invited members of the panel to examine the role and professional obligations of journalists during the pandemic. Christophe Deloire, Secretary-General of Reporters Without Borders, stated that he does not believe the role of journalists has changed at all, and that journalists still **“need to be a vector of confidence for a society of trust”**.

Younes Mjhed, President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), recalled that in many countries, restrictions on freedom of expression have long complicated the work of journalists and the possibility of cooperation with state authorities, with additional challenges now added by the pandemic.

Regarding this issue, UN Secretary-General António Guterres argued that, when governments are acting in a positive and open manner, journalists can cooperate with authorities but should always preserve their independence and ability to tell the truth. Underlining this, he stated: **“Journalists have only one commitment, the commitment to the truth”** and **“ independence is, in my opinion, the supreme value”**.

Members of the panel expressed concerns regarding the future of independent journalism. Younes Mjahed of the IFJ underlined that the current crisis will have a big impact on the economic viability of independent journalism, and that measures should be taken throughout the world to save journalism: **“It is unimaginable that journalism be allowed to disappear, and this is the challenge we are facing”**.

Maria Ressa of Rappler also stressed the financial hardships experienced by independent media outlets around the world in the context of COVID-19 and warned that **“We have to make sure that this extinction level event doesn’t actually knock out independent journalism”**.

« It is impossible to envisage a world without journalism and it is not the responsibility of journalists themselves to face this alone. »

– Younes Mjahed, President of the International Federation of Journalists

The panelists were invited to respond to questions from the public, posted through social media. The High-Level Dialogue also featured [video addresses](#) by Heads of States. These included Erna Solberg, Prime Minister of Norway; Sebastian Kurz, Chancellor of Austria; and Egils Levits, President of Latvia. Video messages also came from Ministers and political leaders such as Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands; Vera Jourová, Vice-President for Values and Transparency at the European Commission; Luis Almagro, Secretary General of the Organization of American States; and Jean-Baptiste Lemoyne, French State Secretary to the Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs.

« On World Press Freedom Day, to journalists, we say “you are here to protect our freedoms. It’s our duty to protect yours” ».

- Stef Blok, Minister of Foreign Affairs of The Kingdom of the Netherlands

List of speakers:

- **Audrey Azoulay** Director-General, UNESCO
- **António Guterres** Secretary-General, United Nations
- **François-Philippe Champagne** Minister of Foreign Affairs of Canada Co-chair of the Media Freedom Coalition
- **Michelle Bachelet** United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
- **Christophe Deloire** Secretary-General, Reporters without Borders
- **Monika Bickert** Vice-President for Public Policy & Content, Facebook
- **Maria Ressa** Investigative journalist and co-founder of Rappler
- **Younes Mjahed** President, International Federation of Journalists

Session moderated by Jorge Ramos, (journalist & author, Univision)