

UNESCO Colloquium “*Journalism under fire: challenges of our times*”

Organised with the support of the International Programme for the Development of Communication and the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers (WAN-IFRA)

UNESCO Headquarters, 23 March 2017, ROOM X

Background

Traditionally, the news media has been the key generator of journalism for societies. But developments of the last decade are changing this picture. Technological, economic and political transformations are inexorably reshaping the communications landscape. Major recent elections and referenda have raised many questions about the quality, impact and credibility of journalism, with global significance.

In one view, traditional media is losing its control over the definition of news and its central position as the main source of news for audiences. It is being replaced by decentralized, personalized media technologies. Others argue that traditional news brands remain vital for the generation of original news and reliable information, as well as – at least in theory - constituting a guarantee of credibility.

There is also a view that welcomes a broadening of media pluralism through the advent of social media, and sees this as an alternative to mainstream journalism that too often falls short of professional standards. However, another perspective regrets the potential that social media provides for audiences to live in closed information cocoons as well as an apparent inability to distinguish truth from fabrications.

A further debate is the extent to which content on social media platforms should be edited by the platforms, in order to avoid the circulation of “fake news”, or whether this would open the door to potential censorship and controversy over who judges veracity and how.

Finding ways through these issues is of great importance not only for media professionals, but also for societies in general, and governments in particular, since modern societies cannot function and develop without free, independent and professional journalism, based on principles such as fact checking, reflecting a plurality of informed opinions, protecting the confidentiality of media sources, and ensuring journalists’ safety.

Aims and structure:

The knowledge generated by the deliberations, will give all stakeholders a greater appreciation of the issues and ideas for ways forward. These insights will particularly contribute to the 2017 of the UNESCO flagship series World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development.

In the framework of the colloquium, UNESCO will organize two round table discussion in order to provide a global platform to assess the international landscape facing media actors. Thus, media leaders, journalists, experts and Member States will have an opportunity to analyze the extent to which there is a “crisis of journalism”, and unpack the main driving forces involved. The format of both round tables will generally not be speeches, but television-style discussion and debate with a panel, as well as audience interaction.

A changing environment: underlying themes to be discussed

The morning discussion will gather prominent media experts, social scientists and journalists to discuss developments *related to change context and the challenges facing the media*. It will examine

the reasons that some audiences reject quality journalism, choosing unreliable sources instead. Also interrogated will be why some media falls short of professional standards and itself promotes unverified information for particular agendas. The speakers will also put forward ideas of what media professionals could do to regain audience trust. In particular, the following themes will be examined:

1. identity politics and representative democracy;
2. polarization and its impact on communications;
3. quality journalism as a public good;
4. commercial pressures and the sustainability problems of traditional media
5. credibility, information and sustainable development

The afternoon discussion will be opened by the UNESCO Director General and will gather prominent journalists, as well as representatives of media development organizations and of social media networks, to discuss the extent to new players, including active audiences for good and ill, impact on global and national media and news agendas. It will address such issues as social network companies, how algorithms affect news on their networks and the issue of audience fragmentation and information bubbles. In particular, the following themes will be examined:

1. social network companies and producers of “fake news”
2. algorithmic personalization and spam “bots”
3. media education and information literacy programs

Participants and stakeholders - up to 250 participants

- Representatives of UNESCO Member States
- Representatives of news organizations
- Civil Society, academia & professional associations

The colloquium will be held at UNESCO Headquarters within the framework of the *La Presse en Liberté* week of 22 to 29 March 2017, which includes a series of round tables on topics related to press freedom related and an exhibition of original front pages of newspapers’ first editions. It is co-organized by UNESCO together with the Permanent Delegation of Switzerland to UNESCO and the Permanent Delegation of France to UNESCO, with the support of the IPDC.

The event is organized with contributions from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Lithuania, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Latvia, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands.

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Morning Round Table

9:30 a.m. – 13:30 p.m.

Panel 1 - Rise of identity politics as a challenge to representative democracy

Panel 2 - Media challenged - business models and new technologies

Afternoon Round Table

14:30 p.m. – 18:00 p.m.

Panel 3 – A crisis of audience identity: social networks, computer generated misinformation, and “fake news”

Panel 4 – The future of media education and new ethics