



Op-ed by Ms Irina Bokova, UNESCO Director-General on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2017

'Fake news' is not journalism...

Would you trust your news from any source? How are we able to ensure that 'fake'(d) news does not overtake the flow of information?

Journalism plays a vital role for society, bringing verifiable news and informed comment to the public. Every day, the news provides a basis for dialogue and debate, and to make informed decisions on the issues that affect us. It helps us build our identity and, as global citizens, better understand the world around us; it contributes to meaningful changes towards a better future.

Today, however, news producers face many challenges. In-depth and fact-checked news is being overshadowed by shared media content that is all too often far from this standard. On social media in particular, collecting clicks and being first reign supreme over properly verified news and comment. All this further compounds long-existing problems of unjustifiable curbs on press freedom in many parts of the world.

In these circumstances, where does the responsibility lie for ensuring that fact-based debate is not stifled? Whose duty is it to strengthen the media's potential to foster a better future for all? And how do we protect the fundamental rights of freedom of expression and freedom of information, which are the preconditions for independent and free journalism?

The answer is that we must look to ourselves as agents of change – whether we are Government actors, civil society members, business people, academics or members of the media. Each of us has a role to play, because each has a stake in press freedom, which facilitates our ability to seek, receive and impart information.

What happens to journalists and to journalism is a symbol of how society respects the fundamental freedoms of expression and access to information. Society suffers whenever a

journalist falls victim, whether to threats, harassment or murder. It affects us all when press freedom is curbed by censorship or political interference, or is contaminated by manipulation and made-up content.

When the free flow of information is hampered, the void is more easily filled by disinformation, undermining the ability of communities to make informed choices.

With this in mind, the global theme of this year's *World Press Freedom Day* is *Critical Minds for Critical Times: Media's role in advancing peaceful, just and inclusive societies*. This refers to the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, an ambitious 15-year commitment of all UN Member States and stakeholders toward worldwide prosperity, peace and development. Journalism is central to achieving the agenda's 16th goal, which aims for justice for all, peace, and inclusive institutions.

Free and independent journalism reinforces democracy, justice and the rule of law. It also serves as a prerequisite for combating gross economic inequalities, reversing climate change, and promoting women's rights. But without audiences demanding well-researched and conflict-sensitive narratives, critical reporting will be increasingly side-lined. Every citizen has a direct stake in the quality of the information environment. 'Fake'(d) news can only take root in the absence of critical thinking and the assumption that if it looks like news then it must be. Media and Information Literacy efforts have a central role in building the necessary defences in the minds of individuals to face these phenomena.

On *World Press Freedom Day*, let us all be reminded that fact-based journalism is the light that illuminates the pathway to a future where informed communities can work together, mindful of their responsibilities to each other and to the world we live in.