

JOURNALISM UNDER DIGITAL SIEGE

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#WorldPressFreedomDay

INTRODUCTION

On 2-5 May 2022, UNESCO together with the Government of Uruguay will host the Global Conference for the celebration of World Press Freedom Day (WPFJ). The conference will be in a hybrid format, but – conditions allowing - with the ambition to have the largest possible participation in praesentia.

It is time for the WPFJ's community and movement to get back together, following a year that saw the Nobel Peace Prize awarded to two journalists, and growing challenges to the practice of journalism.

The conference will reunite relevant policymakers, journalists, media representatives, activists, policy makers in Internet companies, cybersecurity managers, AI researchers and legal experts from around the world to explore the digital era's impact on freedom of expression and the safety of journalists, media viability and public trust.

This year's edition will focus on the theme "Journalism under Digital Siege", to spotlight the multifaceted ways in which recent developments in surveillance by state and non-state actors, as well as big data collection and artificial intelligence (AI), impact journalism, freedom of expression and privacy. Also under the spotlight will be the associated challenges to media viability in digital times, and threats to public trust that arise from surveillance and digitally-mediated attacks on journalists, and the consequences of all this on public trust in digital communications.

In these ways, the Conference will further the implementation of principles outlined in the [Windhoek+30 Declaration on Information as a Public Good](#), recently endorsed by the UNESCO General Conference. The 2022 World Press Freedom Day Global Conference will produce a further declaration as a record of key discussions, as well as pointers to follow-up.

DIGITAL SIEGE

The latest UNESCO World Trends Report Insights discussion paper [“Threats that Silence: Trends in the Safety of Journalists”](#) highlights how surveillance and hacking are compromising journalism. This was vividly shown in exposés by investigative journalists and researchers, giving rise to UN human rights experts calling for a temporary global moratorium on the sale and transfer of surveillance technology.

The growing sophistication and undetectability of mal- and spyware and their increasing use against journalists and human rights defenders by state and non-state actors, endanger free and independent journalism. Surveillance can expose information gathered by journalists including from whistle-blowers, and violates the principle of source protection, which is universally considered a prerequisite for freedom of the media and is enshrined in UN Resolutions. Surveillance may also harm the safety of journalists by disclosing sensitive private information which could be used for arbitrary judicial harassment or attack.

The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression presented in May 2019 [findings and concerns on surveillance and human rights](#), noting that “surveillance of individuals – often journalists, activists, opposition figures, critics and others exercising their right to freedom of expression – has been shown to lead to arbitrary detention, sometimes to torture and possibly to extrajudicial killings”. Between 2011 and 2021, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) recorded dozens of [incidents of journalists being targeted by spyware](#). This finding was supported by investigative journalism and fact-checking organizations uncovering the fact that hundreds of journalists had been selected as targets.

AI-powered surveillance of journalists’ movements, and trolling of journalists powered by data-mining and automated attacks, also threaten the free exercise of journalism. Reduced costs means that illegitimate surveillance operations undertaken by governmental or private actors can be broader, disproportionate, more invasive and longer lasting than ever before, without journalists or their sources being aware of them or being able to defend themselves.

Privacy is a pre-requisite for journalists to do their work and ensuring our access to fact-based and reliable information. It is a necessity if they are to communicate freely with sources, receive confidential information, investigate corruption, and guarantee the safety of themselves and their sources.

TRANSPARENCY AS A PUBLIC GOOD

Increased reliance on digital services means that citizens often unknowingly share private information and data in exchange for free services. Individuals' data leaves behind a "digital footprint" that can be analysed in real time or ex-post by hostile and illegitimate actors. Moreover, data held by Internet and cybersurveillance companies about personal lives can often be obtained by authorities without adequate due process or transparency.

There is a growing global push encouraging more transparency regarding how Internet companies exploit citizens' data, how it informs predictive models and artificial intelligence, and enables amplification of disinformation and hatred. This was underlined in the Windhoek+30 Declaration call for technology companies to "work to ensure transparency in relation to their human and automated systems".

Relevant here are UNESCO's set of principles to enhance the transparency of internet platform companies, which will be discussed as an additional tool to understand what data is collected and what impact it has on the safety of journalists and the public at large.

MEDIA VIABILITY AND PUBLIC TRUST

The developments described complement other issues related to journalism under digital siege. More transparency by Internet companies such as in the use of “ad tech” could help news media with viability issues, as well as with their negotiations for a share in the revenues that are generated through online news appearing on their platforms. Greater transparency, and better privacy protection, would also advance accountability of the Internet companies, and enhance public understanding of the online ecosystem. In turn, this could lead to greater trust that digital communications do justice to availing reliable content such as free and professional journalism.

CONCLUSION

There is a growing awareness and mobilization of citizens, media workers and organizations, pushing to reclaim data privacy and ownership, and to ensure transparency as part of the solution to arbitrary surveillance, weakened news media viability, and a decline in public trust. The 2022 World Press Freedom Day Global Conference is a timely moment to take stock of these trends and what can be done about them.

**Your comments and suggestions are welcome,
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