

Freedom of Expression: Facing up the Threat

Tim Dawson President, National Union of Journalists UK and Ireland

What threatens freedom of expression

Freedom of expression encompasses many things – art, protest, free association and free movement. I plan today, however, to talk about the media in general, and professionally produced media in particular.

Its freedom is not necessarily more important than those others that I mention. The media should, however, be an exemplar of a discursive approach to forming opinions, free debate and the act of shining light on shabby, dishonest and selfish behaviour.

The free media faces some considerable threats at the moment, however.

– its economic model is suffering, the internet has taken away print and broadcast's previous monopoly on information. Social media had taken away its advertising. As a result, the number of journalists employed by traditional media houses is falling, lots of titles have closed, and resources for reporting are dwindling.

– governments threaten journalism, in a variety of ways, Trump undermines its legitimacy, the Saudis threaten its existence and a drip-drip of small measures make it harder to source and verify information.

The process of reporting is physically hampered, journalists kidnaped, imprisoned and murdered.

So, what can we do?

First things that all of us can do – international bodies, governments, media owners, journalists and the wider public. We need to build more popular concern about freedom of expression and that focus should be woven into everything we do. All who cherish free societies should make it their business to understand the international and national frameworks that underpin unfettered expression. Making this concern one of our first reflexes makes the defence of free speech and free expression something for which we all take responsibility. We should not be apologetic about using all the influence that we have – using the media itself as a tool – to promote free expression.

We are fortunate that there is a broad supra-national framework that exercises global oversight – the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom Of Expression – a post currently held by Professor David Kay. The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe’s representative on Freedom Of The Media. It was good to see Harlem Désir appointed to the mandate last week, particularly as he already has a track record of thinking radically about the role of social media platforms on civic life.

The formal organisations are buttressed by international representative organisations such as the International Federation of Journalists and any number of NGOs – Article 19, Reporters Sans Frontiers and so on.

There is also, clearly, a vital role for national governments and legislatures. Not only do they set the legal framework within which all media operates, they are also able to pressure other countries to act – for which reason I believe that extracting commitments to freedom of expression should be an important condition when negotiating trade relationships and granting foreign aid.

The role on which I particularly want to concentrate, however, is that of individual journalists and their trades unions.

All copy, every broadcast segment starts with an individual at their keyboard or with their microphone. It seems to me critical that all of those who do that kind of work are very quick to ask ‘what are the implications for freedom of expression of any given act or occurrence’? We occupy influential roles and we should use that privilege for the greater good by keeping freedom of expression on the broader agenda.

But sometimes that is difficult. Not all media employers are keen on this kind of agenda setting. Just think of Rupert Murdoch instructing his publishing house HarperCollins to dump a book by Chis Pattern that was critical of the Chinese leadership he was trying to court.

Not all editors can be relied upon, either. In 1983, for example, when compelled by a court, the British newspaper The Guardian’s editor, Peter Preston, handed over leaked documents that led to the jailing of the whistleblower who supplied an important story. How much more powerful a statement it would have made if the editor himself had stuck to his principles, refused the court’s instruction and gone to prison himself?

So what it is that can provide individual journalists with the confidence to stand up for what, I believe, is the guiding principle of what they do.

The answer is for them to have workplace organisations where they can openly exchange views and concerns and that allow them to take action in concert when the need arrives. In short, I mean trades unions.

I can make a case for trades unions for any number of reasons –because we work to enhance wages, because we are a check against workplace bullying and erratic managerial decisions and because we lend workers a general air of self confidence. But I want to highlight a couple of instances where NUJ members in the UK have explicitly taken action to defend and enhance freedom of speech and to ensure that is it responsibly exercised.

Express Group Newspapers is a British publisher, whose roots go back to the mighty Beaverbrook Empire, once owner of the largest circulation newspapers on earth. In recent times it has published the Sunday and Daily Express – mid market papers, and the Daily Star – a downmarket tabloid. The politics of all three papers have generally been of the right or centre right. In the early 2000s, however, staff on the papers became concerned that the paper's coverage of asylum seekers had strayed from robust reporting to stirring up racism. One of its front covers, for example, led on the headline ASYLUM SEEKERS RUN FOR YOUR LIVES.

The journalists came together and agreed about their concerns. A vote was taken and they agreed to send a collective complaint to the Press Complaints Commission – the UK's then press regulator.

It did not stop the papers in their tracks, indeed, the journalists felt compelled to repeat this step a couple of years later, but it laid down a very public marker that the staff thought that the papers were being used in a way that went beyond what it is acceptable for newspapers to do.

In 2006, the Daily Star's management wanted to run a front page story saying the papers as The Daily Fatwah intended simply to mock islam. The journalists walked out of their workplace and the newspaper changed its plans.

My second example is even more dramatic.

In 1985 the BBC commissioned a program about life in Northern Ireland and how it had been shaped by the quarter of a century of armed conflict that had

affected that area. While the program was being made, Margaret Thatcher, declared that ‘terrorists should be starved of the oxygen of publicity’. When it became known that the program included an interview with a member of a paramilitary organisation, the then Home Secretary Leon Brittan stated that transmission would be against the national interest.

The BBC governors held an emergency meeting and decided to obey this injection from the Government.

Staff at the BBC, and at other broadcasters were outraged. They met as members of the NUJ, and unions covering different skill groups and went on strike for a day in protest. In all 6,000 broadcasters laid down their tools and a great many stood on picket lines. As a result the director general of the BBC, Alastair Milne relented and the program was broadcast.

Now, these are clearly the kind of extreme examples that occur very rarely. However, the fact that they did remains emblematic of an approach that encourages journalists to take collective responsibility for freedom of expression and freedom of the press. If journalists feel confident that, in extremis, they could take this kind of action, it gives them the confidence to challenge the myriad small challenges that might rein in free expression – the feelings of advertisers, or powerful individuals, the whims of editors or the dictates of owners.

Trades union organisation is obviously only one of the necessary buttresses for freedom of expression, but it is a vital one. All trades unions do important, indeed, vital work, but those representing journalists are among the most important. I would encourage all journalists to join a union and to insist that they be allowed to organise in their workplaces. Doing that provides free expression’s most important safeguards – the collective will of those whose profession requires they to exercise that liberty.

Short Biography

Tim Dawson is the president of the National Union of Journalists in Britain and Ireland, having spent nearly 20 years on his union’s national executive. He has been a freelance journalist for many years, as well as having been a feature writer, columnist and commissioning editor on The Sunday Times, a correspondent on The New Statesman and a reporter at People Weekly (US).

He is the author of several books, including: *Make eBooks Pay*, *Reporting Returns and Copyright For Journalists And Writers* (with Mike Holderness). He also runs the websites newmodeljournalism.com and cycling-books.com.