

Transcript: Q&A

Stifling the Media: Barriers to Press Freedom

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Question 1

Thank you. First of all, thank you to all the speakers. You were very insightful. I thoroughly enjoyed listening as did everyone here. My question is actually directed towards Kirsty. I unfortunately have a slightly more conservative viewpoint with regards to the particular release of documents to the media, with regards to intelligence. I do come from a defence background and I also currently have a legal background as well, which probably doesn't bode very well. What I'm actually curious about, in the spirit of debate, how would you deal with the situation with regards to the release of intelligence documents? I know you did say that you thought that the judiciary report recently released was particularly biased. I'm very curious what is your opinion, how do you deal with those different factions and security as well as the freedom of the press?

Kirsty Hughes

It's a huge area of debate. Personally I think almost nobody, although I think there are some sort of 100 per cent libertarians who would say that everything should be open, but most people would say that of course firstly there should be some secret documents and secondly that some targeted surveillance is part of security of policing or whatever. So the question is the extent. That's one question. And I don't think mass surveillance, gathering data on the whole population belongs in any democracy.

In terms of the leaks, there are obviously a lot of issues in terms of the digital age about the transformation of the scale of these leaks. But I think if you look at what the *Guardian* did, and Alan Rusbridger talked about this a lot, the other achievements in terms of what they did about managing the scale of that data, talking to security services and the White House in the States and in the UK, they exercised responsible journalist skills in terms of trying to define and decide the public interest versus the national interest.

John Lloyd

Do you think journalists are capable of judging what should or should not be released? What is or is not dangerous? Do you think Snowden was right to do as he did? Because he dumped everything.

Kirsty Hughes

But what he didn't do was dump it into the public domain.

John Lloyd

No, but sooner or later it will be.

Kirsty Hughes

I think the judgement in the Miranda case which was the one I thought was deeply disturbing essentially says only governments can judge. They answer your question, John, by saying editors cannot. So the only people who are going to judge public interest are politicians. But the whole point, or one of the main roles of the media is to hold to account

the government and to judge that public interest and to investigate it. If you look at that judgement, it was fascinating. The security services had to go back to the British border police three times before they would even agree to hold David Miranda. First of all, when they came to the bit on the form that said, 'Is this person a risk or potential risk of terrorism,' they put, 'Not applicable'. Yet the judgement basically said anyone carrying journalistic material can be deemed, you know, that there is a leak, that it's terrorist. So what about sources, whistle-blowers? It's a huge issue.

Question 2

I've really enjoyed the debates or the presentation. My question now, first of all I'm not a journalist so I'm talking from a layman's perspective, somebody who is observing the progress of the media. Look at the topic: barriers to press freedom. I just have a question. Who is a journalist? Is a journalist allowed to take sides? I.e. take the establishment's view. If those questions are answered, my third question now is if the journalist from my observation, because if you look from CNN to every other mainstream, they seem to say the same news. The only difference is maybe the height and race of the reporter, but the same news.

If that's the case, if the journalists now decide to do their own thing, do they have the right to announce that fight, because now from that perspective, it's more like you're trying to go against your master. If you know what I mean? Not you, it's just that from my observation.

John Lloyd

I didn't hear, do they have the right to do what?

Question 2

Question number 1: Who is a journalist? Number 2: Are they allowed to take sides? From my observation, it seems as if they've been trying their best to represent the interests of the establishment. If that's the case and they now decide to go contrary, that could be one of the barriers that could crop up.

James Deane

Who is a journalist, clearly almost anyone is a journalist at the moment with the rise of citizen journalism and so on. John should probably talk about that because he's a huge expert on these issues and has been following very closely. Are they allowed to take sides? Freedom means you're allowed to take sides, absolutely. So I don't have any problem with journalists taking sides and media organizations take sides all the time. There's a slight difference when it comes to broadcast media, and in this country it's actually more difficult and I would say that's right in terms of the political impartiality of broadcaster. Particularly in the UK, that's very tightly regulated. I would say that's a good thing.

John Lloyd

The other question was, do you think they all speak from one voice, basically?

James Deane

That's my third thing, was that I think the question is, where is the tipping point where most journalism is actually serving a particularly narrow commercial, political, factional interest? It's very difficult to see actually who is serving the public interest. BBC is the organization I'm attached to. We have staff cards. Audiences are at the heart of everything we do. I actually think public interest journalism is in real peril.

I suspect that one of the big things we're going to be tracking over the next few years is the near collapse in trust in the media, because I don't think many people think the media is serving their interests. You can be partial, you can take sides and still serve the public if this is what you feel is best for society. Pretty well all journalism is there to serve particular agendas, then where does that leave the public?

One thing I would say, there's a lot of focus at the moment on social media and ICT, and that's where if you want to do a research project, you'll focus on Facebook in Egypt or whatever... I would actually argue that that's become a little bit misplaced. One of the things that actually brings together traditional legacy media in many of the countries we're working in, and social media, there's a reason it exists, is to advance an agenda. Whether it's social, on an individual basis or legacy which is largely on a corporate or political or factional basis, the reason it's there, the reason it's paid to be there is to put forward particular agendas and interests in society. When that happens, what happens to democracy? And what happens to the public?

John Lloyd

It's a very dire point. Actually, what one sees in Greece over the last few years is the collapse of trust in journalists, at the time when one would think that journalists stood for anti-establishment or giving people what they want in the way of information, what you see is the journalists being identified with the establishment and sometimes getting beaten up in demonstrations. I wanted to bring things back to Turkey in just one second, so we have at least one ambassador to Turkey in the room and it would be good to focus some attention to what Yavuz said, but first you should come in on this question.

Yavuz Baydar

Let me add a few points. Press freedom and free expression are not the same thing. Everybody has an opinion in this world. More and more, increasingly, everybody in this world finds media to express, through blogs, etc. Millions of people out there. There are zillions of opinion makers out there. Press freedom is something else than free expression. They are converging, yes, but press freedom is about finding the truth and sharing the truth with the public.

I don't know who a journalist is, but I know what journalists do. Journalists do two things. They cover structures of power, that's number one. Second, they cover social and scientific phenomena. That's what they do. They do it on the basis of ethics, accuracy, etc. So they have a playground which is limited, and this is something else than opinion. You have to reach the truth. You have to find the truth and share it.

In that context, I think truth matters much more than taking sides for this or that. If you get the truth, no matter what its consequences are, you'll publish it. You share it publicly. That's, I think, what we should clarify the notion of today what a journalist is. In this dense jungle of opinion, journalism is risking decline. That's why now a lot of people with a lot of experience... I could give you one example, the former editor-in-chief of *Le Monde* established media part, and he is fiercely defending less opinion, more news analysis. Facts, facts and facts. If you look at the [indiscernible] website, there is some sort of similarity with the *Guardian*, for example, it's based on news stories. It's very easy to share opinion and a lot of people mix it up with press freedom.

John Lloyd

[Indiscernible] has caused at least two resignations of ministers by finding out the truth about... It's very refreshing to hear journalists say that we should pursue the truth. I very much agree with that. But there was a somewhat widespread view that truth doesn't exist and even if it does, we can't find it. It's good to have that reasserted.

Question 3

Responding to your prompt, I used to be an ambassador in Turkey. All the speakers have spoken eloquently about the pressures on contemporary journalism and the constraints on freedom of information. I wonder whether Yavuz can say something about the way in which journalists have combated that in Turkey. It seems to be one of the striking features of what's happened in Turkey, that the journalists there driven away from the conventional media have found ways of dealing with that situation. P24, of which you're a member is one of those. Can you say more about that?

Yavuz Baydar

It's a very dire situation right now, but as opposed to that, Turkish press tradition is one of the oldest in Europe. It dates back to 1810, 1820s, have always been marked by periods of fierce resistance to censorship. During the Ottoman period, also during the republic period. So that element is there in the DNA of Turkish journalism. There will always be pockets of resistance, no matter how much the oppression there is in that domain.

With the current situation as I described it to you, the independence, the firings, sackings and also the vertical formatting of institutional oppression in terms of turning each and every newsroom in the main bulk of the Turkish media into open air prisons in terms of not being able to freely discuss and edit news without an intervention from the proprietors, this made the situation far worse than ever before.

Add to this the fact that those among approximately 14,000 journalists operating in Turkey, those who are members of journalist unions are only one per cent. One per cent. This is, I think, the most tragic part of the situation now. Those who want to be members of the unions are not allowed, are being fired, finding themselves out in the street. This leads to fear. This leads to widespread implementation of self-censorship. Three: This leads to deepening of polarity between journalist organizations, lack of solidarity. There's not a common platform. Journalists are fighting against each other. They are hostile. They hate each other and they become part of this fierce acrimonious political struggle.

In this domain, I will also add another dimension that for each and every smart, arbitrary or authoritarian leading in emerging democracies, we need to block transformation. Calculation is very cold-blooded, as in the case of Turkish PM or some other Middle East or Western Balkan regimes. The question is very simple. Where do the public get their news from? It's very simple. It's TV. In Turkish case, the people get it for free, their news. So the first target is the audio-visual, mainly the visual part of audio-visual. That's why we have almost complete blockage or control, containment of TV.

Print is losing and also in the calculations of the authority, people out there in the rural areas read less and less newspapers and read maybe occasionally this and that column, but it doesn't mean anything in terms of changing the opinion of the electorate. But journalists will continue fighting because there will always be need for news in a country like Turkey, ranked as first 16 or 15 of world economies. It's a developing country with high growth.

So people will need, particularly middle classes and upper middle classes, access to accurate news. The search for journalists in defence of their professionalism, is now shifting towards the digital and seeing the fact that in terms of Twitter usage, Turks are world champions according to e-marketer survey published by *Financial Times* recently. They top the league in terms of Twitter penetration, followed closely by Japan and Netherlands.

Facebook is the same. They are in the top five in the world. This explains partly, I think, but I think importantly, that Turkish public will not give up on the struggle to reach alternative sources of information. There are also columnists and journalists in Turkey that have more than 500,000 followers in Twitter, which means individual circulation numbers. They can lead people to various links in the digital domain.

This I think will in mid-run or long-run affect urban electorate, because urban electorate are more and more into internet usage. This also leads to dramatic increase since last June of internet websites – one is DKN, the other is T24. You mentioned P24, but T24 is sort of a sister institution, a website run by completely independent colleagues which had up until Gezi Park protests approximately 20,000 unique users per day. Now during Gezi Park protests, it topped 500,000 and stabilized around 300,000 now. There are other similar competitors.

This means that people are not going to give up and also journalists will, seeing this kind of opening, will flock towards that kind of activity although it doesn't pay that much as in conventional media.

John Lloyd

That is the problem.

Question 4

I have two questions, both on social media. The first is, is it a problem that increasingly traditional news sources in Turkey are facing compulsion by the government to do certain things when people can simply go to a news source for their daily dose of news? Secondly,

and this is a broader question on the institutional role of the press, I wondered what the future is for the press as an institution and traditional privileges which the press have enjoyed, the kind of right to hold the government to account. In an era when it's so hard to define journalists, where someone with thousands of Twitter followers could be defined as a journalists, it's slightly opaque.

Question 5

I wanted to touch on a couple of points – the convergence of freedom of press versus freedom of expression. It actually seemed to tie to me quite succinctly with the idea of who is a journalist, because you talked about the responsibilities of journalists and freedom of expression doesn't mean freedom of responsibility or to deal with the repercussions of your expressions. Do you think that the increasing digital age and the complexity with pursuing those repercussions is actually driving some of these reactions, including on Google for example? What's the answer there, of how people actually deal with that right to be forgotten versus the obligations to actually be able to say what you mean and to not be shouting to a soundproof room?

Question 6

I was just wondering, talking more particularly a Western government, with the Leveson Inquiry, kind of the whistle-blowing idea, if governments are becoming more secretive with ideas of national security and what they do to increase national security, the way that journalists have to go about finding the truth or the kind of independence to that, is developing into the areas of illegal things. Which is then forbidding actually press freedom and freedom of speech in that area, because you're saying that you can't talk about this because it's illegal to obtain this information, and even that delves into other things that are not national security. There is not just government preventing freedom of press, but also the law in itself because the information is being put more and more into secret. So you have to have things that come out that initially would be considered illegal, to have any form of freedom of the press.

James Deane

Can I just be... I'm not a complete pessimist, that's one thing. This is an extraordinarily complex set of microcosms going all over the world. One of the countries I'm really interested in at the moment in terms of providing sort of potentially some real positive sides is Somalia. Having been through a whole process of being hugely, where media was really captured by warlords and then by al Shabaab, actually the future of media in Somalia looks quite bright. There are lots of reasons for that. Journalistic courage is principal among them.

There is more stability in the country than there was. But it's also because it's got an astonishingly media literate population. People in the country in segments of society are really good at working out what's rubbish and what's true. They've had to do that over centuries, and actually a media that survives is a media that tends to be more factual and tells them information which they can trust. Those are the media where they're prospering.

That's one little lacunae of optimism. Another one is, one of the things I'm working on is around the proposed 2015 sustainable development goals. I won't go into that, because we haven't got time. David Cameron sat and co-chaired a high level panel on that, and one of the things it said was that freedom of the press should be a key part of a post-2015 development agenda. So I think Kirsty is right in terms of the extent to which in terms of diplomatic and foreign policy terms, there are real questions around where that fits in within British foreign policy.

Curiously, some of those issues are shifting into the development realm. I have a very quick quote from that report, 'People must be central to a new global partnership. To do this, they need the freedom to voice their views and participation in the decisions that affect their lives without fear. They need access to information and to independent media.' If replacement for the Millennium Development Goals actually starts to build in access to independent media, that's another quite useful driver to getting this stuff entrenched within international development, within the international system.

Kirsty Hughes

These are really big questions, but I think to some extent they're interlinked in the way that the discussion went. If the press or if the media are not holding government to account... Are we in a democracy unless governments are properly held to account? Can they be held to account if we don't have full and transparent information, if there isn't journalism in the public interest? I think we've already discussed to some extent the risk that as we get all the good things about citizens, journalism and the digital age, that we may end up with more opinion than news. Where does holding to account in the public interest come in that?

On the other hand, when it comes to the last question about, what's illegal and what's not? Then of course the standard answer to that starts by saying, freedom of speech is a fundamental but not an absolute right. Governments can put some constraints on it when necessary, and so on. That starts to get very tedious sounding, but I think it's actually crucial. If you're going to say in some very limited cases, you can put constraints on free speech, then you've got to have a vibrant democracy as well as legal system that's going to challenge that and say, 'Where are those limits? Why do I think that the Miranda judgement overstepped that?'

And editors, you need editors to be able to say, 'We think we will have a public interest defence if we do the thing that's illegal.' What happens to that brave journalistic judgement if we're all just individual bloggers? So I think we do still need that sort of journalism. There are some wonderful reports by the UN free speech rapporteur on all these issues.

Yavuz Baydar

Can I have clarification on the question?

Question

[Inaudible]

Yavuz Baydar

Frankly, I don't know. It's a challenge. The priority right now in the specific case of Turkey is the EU accession process. If you line up the priorities, there are three chapters that the Turkish government refuse to open. One – competition, second – social policy, third is the public procurement. Deliberately on all fronts by Turkish government. Those all three have to do with the market, with the sector, with the media. That should be noted.

Second level has to do with ownership structures. There needs to be structural changes passing through parliament, and Council of Europe since 1994 issued recommendation after recommendation to the member countries. Latest one, 2011, on transparency, ownership, cross-ownership, etc. Most of those were deliberately ignored by Council of Europe countries. But those were good recommendations and they still are. They should be followed.

Public of any country has a right to know who owns what in the media sector. In most of those countries, people have no idea who owns what in media sector. This is, as I said, this is a very lucrative situation for political powers, because it's politically favourable for the greedy businessmen. It brings money. Media is a fantastic instrument to accumulate money.

That's why I am rather optimistic in emerging democracies to bring about new dynamics for alternative media financing, etc. I think one solution could be democratic countries engaging their public broadcasters to establish websites in emerging democracies, like BBC, etc. That should be helpful.

So these kind of thoughts are circulated now among ourselves and I think people will seek crowdsourcing. There are diasporas, for example, in countries like Turkey, American Turkish diaspora is willing to crowdsource alternative media more and more, because the concerns are more and more. Also, Turkish diaspora in Europe are also concerned about or willing to crowdsource.

John Lloyd

Thank you very much indeed. There's been a theme tonight, there's been a number of themes. There's been an extraordinarily interesting conversation, but one of the themes which has come up from all, I think, of the three panellists, to some extent from your questions and comments, is there's been a disturbing trend, if it is a trend, and that is that the liberal assumptions that most of us have for the last several decades, that is there was a movement towards greater openness in politics, economics, society, sexual issues, may now be if not retreating, at least meeting more determined opposition from a number of countries than it has before.

That of course, as Kirsty especially said, but all of the panellists did, is more evident now. We've zeroed in on Turkey but it's true in China, now it's true in Russia. It's true in a large number of countries and if not pessimism, then at least a clear eyed view of what's happening in media and in society I think is joined upon us. But luckily we have people like the panel and especially Yavuz, who has to be in the front trenches of these things in

Turkey who can fight for what we still believe in. Thank you to the three panellists, thanks to you.