



When people are properly informed, fake news doesn't stand a chance

Keynote address by Stephen J. Adler, Editor-in-Chief, Reuters on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day 2019, National Arts Centre, Ottawa, May 2nd, 2019

To quote this speech:

STEPHEN J, ADLER. «When people are properly informed, fake news doesn't stand a chance»; speech delivered on World Press Freedom Day 2019 at the National Arts Centre, Ottawa, May 2019.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Canadian Commission for UNESCO.

Thank you—Canadian Committee for World Press Freedom—for inviting me to join you today. It is an honor both for me and for Reuters. And congratulations to all the Press Freedom Award winners. You are fighting the good fight, the one that brings us together in this room and holds us together in spirit.

We all know that these are treacherous times for journalists and—consequently—for the billions of people around the globe whose lives can be informed, improved and sometimes even saved by the work we do. At a time when the world’s need for accurate information is unprecedented, those who seek to gather and share it are under relentless attack. More than 100 journalists and other media workers were killed over the last 18 months. Shockingly, of the 860 journalists who have been murdered since 1992, NO ONE has been held responsible in roughly 85% of those cases. NO ONE.

As I’m speaking to you this afternoon, more than 250 journalists are behind bars—including my Pulitzer Prize-winning colleagues Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo in Myanmar. These two intrepid Reuters reporters were set up, arrested, and sentenced to seven years in prison because they accurately and fairly reported a horrific massacre of Rohingya Muslims by military and police forces in Rakhine State. Despite the public and private efforts of world leaders—including representatives of Canada—Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo have been behind bars for more than 500 days now. It is a global disgrace, and we continue to fight for their release! But as Time Magazine noted in naming them among its Persons of the Year: “They are representative of a broader fight by countless others around the world ... who risk all to tell the story of our time.”

According to Freedom House, only 13 percent of the global population lives in countries with a truly free press. Elsewhere, journalists face violence, legal constraints, restricted access to information, harassment, and other barriers to doing their work.

This is all in stark contrast to the guarantees provided in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a founding document of the UN and one of our profession's most sacred texts. Just to remind you, Article 19 states that:

"Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

I'd argue that a pretty decent consensus had formed around this post-war principle, especially in modern economies, prior to Sept. 11, 2001. Overall, judges and elected leaders in much of the world were leaning toward ever-greater press freedom. Powerful nations were espousing free expression and attempting to encourage, goad and penalize less enthusiastic governments into compliance. And as multinational corporations and NGOs traversed the globe, they were harnessing and protecting the free flow of information.

So what happened? Let's start with 9-11. For all the obvious ways it was calamitous, it was also a blow to the press because it set off a massive retreat around the world from the principles of free expression, a retreat that—for several overlapping reasons—has continued to this day.

The first consequence of 9-11, of course, was an immediate escalation of the global war on terror, which in many nations altered the existing balance between security and civil liberties. Suddenly, it seemed acceptable in many quarters to spy on private individuals, collect their personal data, and constrain the press, all in the interests of national security.

Meanwhile, migrant tides unleashed by terror-related wars in the Middle East helped stoke authoritarianism and populism around the world. The often-harsh regimes that came to

power have solidified their control by harassing and persecuting journalists, shutting down or co-opting independent news outlets, and changing their laws to criminalize unwanted or unflattering reporting. Many nations have repurposed old laws to equate independent journalism with anti-state activity such as espionage and treason. That's what Myanmar did by using the colonial-era Official Secrets Act to rationalize the prosecution of our Reuters reporters.

Just in the past several years, more than a dozen countries have instituted or proposed criminal laws against “fake news”—a pernicious term that was once used to describe intentional disinformation, but that has been subverted to conflate what is inaccurate with what is merely unwanted. The retreat of the U.S. from its role as a powerful force standing up for press freedom around the world is as significant as any other factor affecting the media. Instead of working to defend and protect journalists, the U.S. president derides us as enemies of the people, and such rhetoric has been echoed – and acted on – by many other government leaders.

Moreover, the unprecedented mass dissemination on social media of hate speech and fabrications—dressed and styled to look like news—has undermined respect for responsible journalism. The major social media platforms have so far taken little responsibility for this, and to the extent that they have acknowledged the problem, it is an understatement to say that they have been slow in addressing it.

For the most part, multinational corporations sadly haven't pushed back against free-speech violations, often so intent on maintaining business ties with authoritarian regimes that they accede to censorship demands that they would never accept in their home countries. This is a little-discussed but significant cost of the expansion of globalization in this century.

Thankfully, there are many in the U.S. government who understand these dangers. And Canada's generally staunch support for press freedom continues to offer an antidote and a more

positive role model for other nations. I'm clearly getting partisan here, but it no doubt helps to have a former Reuters journalist and forceful press freedom advocate—Chrystia Freeland—as your foreign minister.

Today, on World Press Freedom Day, even as we decry the multi-pronged attacks on journalists, we mustn't despair but rather take concrete steps to buttress press freedom and restore public trust in the good work that we do. Here are six suggestions.

FIRST. We need to make our advocacy for press freedom a truly apolitical pursuit.

We have to understand that the best way to advocate for ourselves is not to advocate against any politician or political moment, but to push for broader access to information; stronger legal protections; and greater security for our journalists. Pursuing these goals systematically will get us further than any partisan outrage. In fact, recent studies in the U.S. have shown that support for free-press protections actually declines when advocates focus on Trump's attacks on the media rather than on the positive contributions of a free press. Just as a practical matter, when press advocacy appears to cater to elite sentiment—when it is self-righteous and inwardly focused, when it relies on political solidarity rather than broader principles—it generally fails.

In this regard, we need to acknowledge that some in the media have played a role in the crisis of confidence we now face. Those who have chosen to take sides in the nasty political wars that beset us in the West—and to inject their opinions into the news columns—are exacerbating both the polarization of society and its anti-media sentiment. I'm often the only person on "future of news" panels to express even the aspiration to be objective. The prevailing view is not only that objectivity is impossible but that claiming neutrality is hypocritical because everyone has an agenda. My response, at this point barely a lone cry, is that journalists—like doctors,

accountants, pilots, and, indeed, hockey players—practice a craft that has everything to do with skill and accuracy and nothing to do with partisanship. I believe our craft is a noble, even at times a glorious, one, and that it is at its best when it remains a craft, not a campaign.

SECOND: We need to communicate the BENEFITS of independent journalism because we can no longer assume that people recognize its value.

An obvious benefit of such journalism is that it exposes wrongdoing. In recent years, journalists have uncovered the corporate greed and lax oversight behind a devastating opioid crisis; they have spurred the release of thousands of slaves working in the fishing industry; they have shielded and vindicated victims of human trafficking, hazardous working conditions, ethnic cleansing, unsafe drinking water, and sex abuse in multiple countries. They have brought down corrupt leaders on several continents. We must talk about all this work as the powerful force for good that it is. As Louis Brandeis wrote in 1914: "Publicity is justly commended as a remedy for social and industrial diseases. Sunlight is said to be the best of disinfectants." Still true today.

We can talk, too, about the less dramatic but equally powerful benefit of independent journalism: the straightforward gathering, dissemination, and curation of information. Sound information helps everyone—in every country, in every era, and in myriad ways. We need to remind people that news is just one category of information, and that accurate information will always underlie good decision making — especially in the Information Age.

Consider the financial community. Traders and investors don't care about our opinions or our politics; they need to know what actually happened so they can make smart investment decisions.

Likewise, business executives need to know about tariffs, trade regulations, work rules, the state of national and local economies, and the activities of their competitors so they can make informed choices about where and how to run their businesses. And, of course, individuals need accurate information about schools, insurance, mortgages, investments, the job market, crime, traffic, and laws so they can make intelligent decisions in their own lives.

Journalists are part of this information eco-system, and people's lives would be far worse if everything was just advertising, propaganda, and spin. We in the news business must say all this publicly and frequently.

THIRD: As journalists, we need to band together and speak with a single loud voice.

While it's certainly encouraging that so many press freedom organizations have sprung up recently, broad coalitions can usually exert more influence and pressure than any single group. Recent developments are a cause for optimism. In one example, a consortium of dozens of news organizations from around the world—calling itself the One Free Press Coalition—has formed this year to publish and promote a monthly 10 Most Urgent list of individual journalists in greatest jeopardy for trying to report the truth. The list, posted on the platforms of every member organization, Reuters included, reaches more than 1 billion people per month. More collective efforts like this are needed, and crucially, they need to include public officials and business executives who share practical reasons to care about press freedom.

FOURTH: To engender trust in journalism, journalists must be trustworthy.

We need to exercise our press freedom in the public interest and be transparent about our methods and the impact of our work. Too many people—encouraged by unsupportive world leaders—believe that we make up our sources and don't care about the facts. To combat these

beliefs, we need to step down from our sometimes-lofty perches and show how our work is done. At Reuters, for example, we publish a feature, called Backstory, to inform users of how we've gone about reporting particular stories that generate wide interest or potential controversy. Many other news organizations have similar initiatives, and I'd encourage others to pursue them as well.

FIFTH: Journalists should report more positive news.

I'm not talking about offering up warm and fuzzy features about kittens and pandas but rather about providing the context people need in order to understand their circumstances and their choices. It's true that stories of conflict, disaster and mayhem will always garner attention. And it's true that global warming, wars, and immigration are realities. But when looking at basic indicators—such as literacy, poverty, disease, and hunger—it's also reasonable to conclude that the world has never been a better place. Extreme poverty has been sliced roughly in half in recent decades; access to electricity and running water has risen significantly; child mortality has plummeted thanks to vaccinations and public health campaigns, while new HIV infections among children have been cut in half.

The nature of news makes it challenging to document these long-term trends. When global change comes slowly and without obvious drama, we don't always think of it as newsworthy. But it is. Our purpose is to provide users with accurate, unbiased news, information and insights that help them make better-informed decisions. That's our job. And we need to share the positive trends in order to do this job well.

SIXTH: We must work to build media-literacy training into school curricula wherever and whenever we can.

I've come to this cause recently and passionately. We as journalists can do our work well. We can strive for accuracy. We can advocate for our freedoms. We can fact-check ourselves and each other. But we can only help people avoid being manipulated and deceived if they have the skills to distinguish between the factual and the fake, to detect and weigh biases, and assess the reliability of a wide range of sources. Only then can we help them become informed, empowered, and perhaps sometimes even enlightened. And only then can we count on their support for free and independent journalism.

I am not unrealistic about our challenges, but I am hopeful about our ability to face them, because I believe deeply that a free press actually benefits most people and most institutions — and I trust that, over time and with the right encouragement, people will act in their own best interests and stand up for press freedom.

In 1787, Thomas Jefferson famously wrote: "Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." Less well known was his next line: "but I should mean that every man should receive those papers & be capable of reading them."

Translated into more contemporary terms, that means: wide, unimpeded, uncensored, un-harassed distribution of content across all possible platforms—and it means a public with well-developed media literacy skills. At least that's what I heard him say.

Thank you, Thomas Jefferson, for your succinct summing-up, and thank you all for being here and for your commitment to press freedom.