

Culture Secretary Calls On Public To Buy A Newspaper For World Press Freedom Day

Op Ed for World Press Freedom Day by Culture Secretary Lucy Frazer

For any democracy, information is oxygen. It shapes our understanding of the world. It feeds our ability, individually and collectively, to make informed decisions about our communities, our lives, the way we are governed. This fundamental freedom - the power and the right to access reliable information - would not exist without a free and thriving press.

We are fortunate in the UK. Our free press is admired around the world and as Culture Secretary I am enormously proud of the vibrant media landscape we have in this country. Outstanding public service broadcasters that guide the nation through major moments, from Covid-19 to the Coronation. Centuries old national and local newspapers and magazines that bring readers exceptional analysis, brilliant investigations, and a plurality of opinions on the issues of the day. Dynamic websites and blogs that offer audiences fresh perspectives and unique insight.

Today is World Press Freedom Day and it's an unmissable opportunity to recognise all those journalists and broadcasters who spend their days exposing wrongdoing and injustice, scrutinising people and power, and championing truth. It is a day to go and buy a local or a national newspaper and be grateful for the brilliant reporters shining a light on the good and the bad. But, while there is much to celebrate, we must use this moment to recognise that press freedom should never be taken for granted.

Across the world there are daily threats and challenges to media freedom and, in recent years, dozens of broadcast and print journalists, commentators, editors, camera crews and community media workers have been harassed, assaulted, kidnapped and killed while doing their jobs.

According to the ICIJ, 99 journalists lost their lives in 2023 - with three quarters of those lives lost in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Closer to home an Iranian broadcast journalist was stabbed a month ago on the streets of London. Fortunately Mr Zeraati returned to broadcasting his show on 5 April and told his audience that "the show must go on."

Last month the Wall Street Journal ran a front page with a large empty space where the reporting of its journalist, Evan Gershkovich should be. Evan is still locked up in a Russian jail on false charges of espionage, more than a year after his arrest, and he's one of a huge number of journalists who have faced imprisonment for simply doing their jobs.

We are doing everything possible to protect journalists operating in the UK, and there are three areas in particular where we are collaborating with the media, the police and others to bolster the safety and rights of reporters.

This Government launched the Media Freedom Coalition, we launched the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists and we then backed that same Committee's National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists. Each life lost is an awful reminder of why that work is so important.

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But threats to media organisations do not just come in the form of intimidation or internment. This year, it became clear that one of our iconic media titles could be purchased by a foreign state. It was clear this was not acceptable to the public, or Parliament. So, we stepped in to extend Government powers in this space. Just as we would not expect the UK government to own a newspaper - our laws have now been strengthened to make sure that no foreign state can own, control or influence a newspaper enterprise, and exploit that ownership in a way that undermines our democracy.

For those journalists willing to take on rogue individuals or corrupt entities, the nightmare scenario is an attempt to block the public's right to know by suing them into silence. No person's bank balance should allow them to abuse our legal system and stymie a journalist's ability to report the facts. But that's what can, and does, happen.

I've made it a priority to clamp down on the misuse of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation, otherwise known as SLAPPs. That's why we established a dedicated SLAPPs taskforce to bring together legal and media industry experts to help us understand the problem and work together to tackle vexatious legal actions designed to frustrate journalists' work.

This Government will always stand on the side of our independent media and defend its right to speak the truth, freely and plainly. We recognise that without freedom of expression there is no freedom at all. World Press Freedom Day is a day to remember that.