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‘Gaza is the deadliest conflict for media workers in over 30 years’

UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan on limited freedom of expression worldwide, attacks on journalists and potential reasons for hope

What global trends currently pose the greatest threat to freedom of expression?

The greatest threat today is the backsliding of democracies. Authoritarian states have long maintained a totalitarian stance, systematically suppressing and censoring dissent. However, what is particularly alarming now is that even well-established democracies are beginning to curtail the space for free expression. This is evident in the adoption of restrictive policies targeting media freedom and an increase in attacks on journalists. Such trends are deeply concerning, as media freedom is both a cornerstone of democracy and a fundamental human right.

What is your view on the debate on freedom of speech in Western democracies?

In Western democracies, and democracies in general, we are increasingly observing a polarisation of viewpoints, which creates an atmosphere of fear for those expressing opinions that deviate from the majority perspective. While legal censorship may not always be present, social ostracism and informal pressure often lead individuals to self-censor. This, in effect, narrows the space for free speech.

Moreover, there are subtle but significant ways to suppress media freedom without physically attacking journalists. Some democratic states are adopting policies that edge towards a restrictive, less diverse media space. Hungary serves as a notable example: while the media is technically free, its ownership is largely monopolised by the ruling party. Independent journalism exists primarily online, and outside urban centres like Budapest, people’s access to diverse and critical information is severely restricted. This is particularly concerning given

Hungary's status as a member of the European Union.

Social media platforms have enabled greater expression, but also facilitated disinformation. How should the international community navigate this tension?

When social media first emerged, it was seen as a tool for democratising speech, enabling individuals to share their views without needing access to large media outlets. Over time, however, it has also facilitated disinformation, misinformation, hate speech and various forms of information manipulation. Under international law, information can only be restricted if it threatens the rights and reputation of others or national security, public order or health. It must be prohibited if it amounts to hate speech. But falsehood by itself is not a sufficient reason to prohibit speech. That is because the line between truth and falsehood is often subjective and so open to abuse. This makes it challenging to define disinformation.

Governments frequently misuse the label of disinformation to suppress criticism against themselves. This erodes public trust in the government. Censoring false or manipulated information does not necessarily change the beliefs of those who spread or consume it. Instead, such actions can push conspiracy theories underground, making them harder to counter.

A more effective strategy against disinformation involves fact-checking and fostering reliable, diverse sources of information. Governments must also stop spreading falsehoods themselves and instead proactively provide accurate information. Promoting media literacy is essential to enable the public to distinguish between credible sources and manipulated narratives. This shifts the focus from censorship to building trust in information ecosystems.

Harmful information and disinformation are really loose terms. Who checks the fact-checkers, and who should decide what is disinformation?

The key is not to focus on categorising or labelling specific content as disinformation, but rather to build a healthy information ecosystem. This means fostering diverse viewpoints, ensuring the presence of free and professional media and supporting a variety of independent outlets. Fact-checking should emerge organically from the availability of differing perspectives, not as a reaction to labelling one viewpoint as wrong.

Having multiple viewpoints allows people, provided they have the necessary media literacy, to identify trusted sources and distinguish credible information from unreliable claims. The ultimate goal should

be to build public trust in the information landscape rather than to engage in a reactive fight against disinformation.

You monitor diverse situations around the world. Which regions are currently of greatest concern when it comes to restrictions on freedom of expression?

Almost every region faces challenges regarding freedom of expression. In authoritarian states like China, Russia, Cuba, Venezuela and Iran, there is no independent media at all. However, the issue is not confined to these regimes. As mentioned before, even within the EU, Hungary exemplifies how disinformation and media control can erode press freedom. Even democratic countries such as Singapore and India are increasingly restricting independent public interest journalism.

This is a global problem with far-reaching implications. It undermines democracy, erodes public trust in information, stifles innovation and hampers development. Without urgent attention, these trends pose a significant threat to the global information ecosystem and democratic values.

Attacks on journalists have been rising globally. What concrete steps can states and civil society take to ensure the safety of media professionals?

The primary responsibility of states is to protect journalists, not treat them as adversaries. Journalists are truth-seekers, and their safety is crucial for democracy. Yet, impunity for crimes against journalist remains a major issue: UNESCO reports that nearly nine out of 10 cases of journalist killings go uninvestigated. This sends a dangerous signal: silencing a journalist can be done with little consequence. Legal harassment is also on the rise, with counterterrorism laws misused to target journalists and others in the media sector, as seen in China with the National Security Law in Hong Kong and the case of Jimmy Lai. Strategic lawsuits are another tactic, where defamation suits are filed not to win but to silence journalists through financial and psychological pressure.

Digital threats are growing, too. Online gender-based violence and smear campaigns, particularly against women journalists, are pervasive. Additionally, the lack of media diversity exacerbates these challenges. In many countries, media monopolies dominate, undermining plurality. Financial instability in the traditional media sector, worsened by declining ad revenues due to social media, further threatens press freedom.

To improve journalists' safety, states must end impunity, stop legal

harassment and create a supportive media environment with diverse ownership. Civil society must advocate for accountability, fact-based reporting and better protection mechanisms for journalists, both online and offline.

You recently raised awareness for journalists in Gaza and Lebanon. How bad is the situation there?

Gaza stands out as the deadliest conflict for media workers and journalists in over 30 years of UN-recorded history with the highest numbers of casualties. Many journalists have been killed by the sheer intensity of the war, and there have also been targeted killings. Under international humanitarian law, journalists are civilians and are entitled to protection. Deliberately killing a journalist constitutes a war crime. Yet, journalists have been deliberately killed in Gaza. This problem won't end until impunity is tackled and those responsible for the killings are held accountable. In most cases, this means holding Israel to account.

Israel's treatment of journalists in Gaza, the West Bank and even within its own borders reflects a disturbing pattern of seeking to silence reporting on war crimes. Measures such as killing and detaining journalists, banning *Al Jazeera*, refusing international journalists to access Gaza and placing pressure on independent Israeli media like *Haaretz* have increasingly obstructed critical reporting and restricted the media space. This is deeply concerning. As Israel has failed to investigate the killing of journalists in the occupied Palestinian territory, an independent international investigation should be initiated.

Journalists play an indispensable role in conflict zones. Without their reporting, the world would lack critical insight into the realities on the ground. Peace efforts in Gaza cannot progress without accurate information about the situation. Journalists are not only civilians under international law; they are, in many ways, akin to essential workers. Like ambulance drivers, they move towards the danger rather than away from it. For this reason, they require protection not just equal to civilians, but even greater safeguards to ensure that their vital role in informing the world is upheld.

Do you also see any positive developments with regard to the freedom of expression worldwide?

Yes, there are positive developments. For instance, the reason I am here in Berlin – the Human Rights Award ceremony for PCIN, a journalist network from Nicaragua – provides a clear example. Although independent media in Nicaragua has been almost

completely obliterated by the Ortega regime, journalists have shown remarkable solidarity by creating a network to support their colleagues in exile. This demonstrates that even in the harshest conditions, people find ways to strengthen freedom of expression.

Freedom of expression is not just about media freedom; it is a fundamental right that enables many other rights. It includes the right to information, which is essential for education, scientific progress, innovation, democracy and even peacebuilding. At the grassroots level, freedom of expression has empowered marginalised groups, including women and indigenous people. While disinformation on social media platforms has negative impacts, digital tools have also brought people in remote areas together, enabling them to organise and drive meaningful change through protest, social and youth movements. These forms of activism are critical for building a better world and would not be possible without freedom of expression.

Yes, there are barriers and negative trends, driven by forces trying to restrict the space for free speech. However, resistance is strong. People continue to fight back, and that resilience is a powerful reason for hope.

This interview was conducted by Nikolaos Gavalakis.



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