

**World Press Freedom Day 2019**

# Media for Democracy

**Journalism and Elections in Times of Disinformation**

**Global Conference**  
**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**  
**1-3 May 2019**

## Concept Note

On 3 May 2019, UNESCO will celebrate the 26th edition of the celebration of World Press Freedom Day in almost 100 countries. The worldwide commemoration theme concerns the current challenges faced by media in elections, along with the media's potential in supporting peace and reconciliation.

The global conference event takes place in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and is jointly organized by UNESCO, the Government of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia and the African Union Commission. It is hosted in the African Union Headquarters. The 2019 theme is closely interlinked with the objectives of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the African Union's Agenda 2063, which seeks to promote "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law".

In this respect, Agenda 2063 has earmarked, under its Aspiration 3, a specific goal on "Democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rule of law entrenched". The goal has also identified that democratic values, practices, universal principles of human rights, justice and the rule of law are entrenched as one of its priority areas to be realized by 2023. This is through ensuring that at least 70% of the people perceive the press and exchange of information is free and the freedom of expression prevails.



# Media, Democracy and Peace

**T**he will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures”, says Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Article 19 of the same Declaration covers the right to freedom of opinion and expression: “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”.

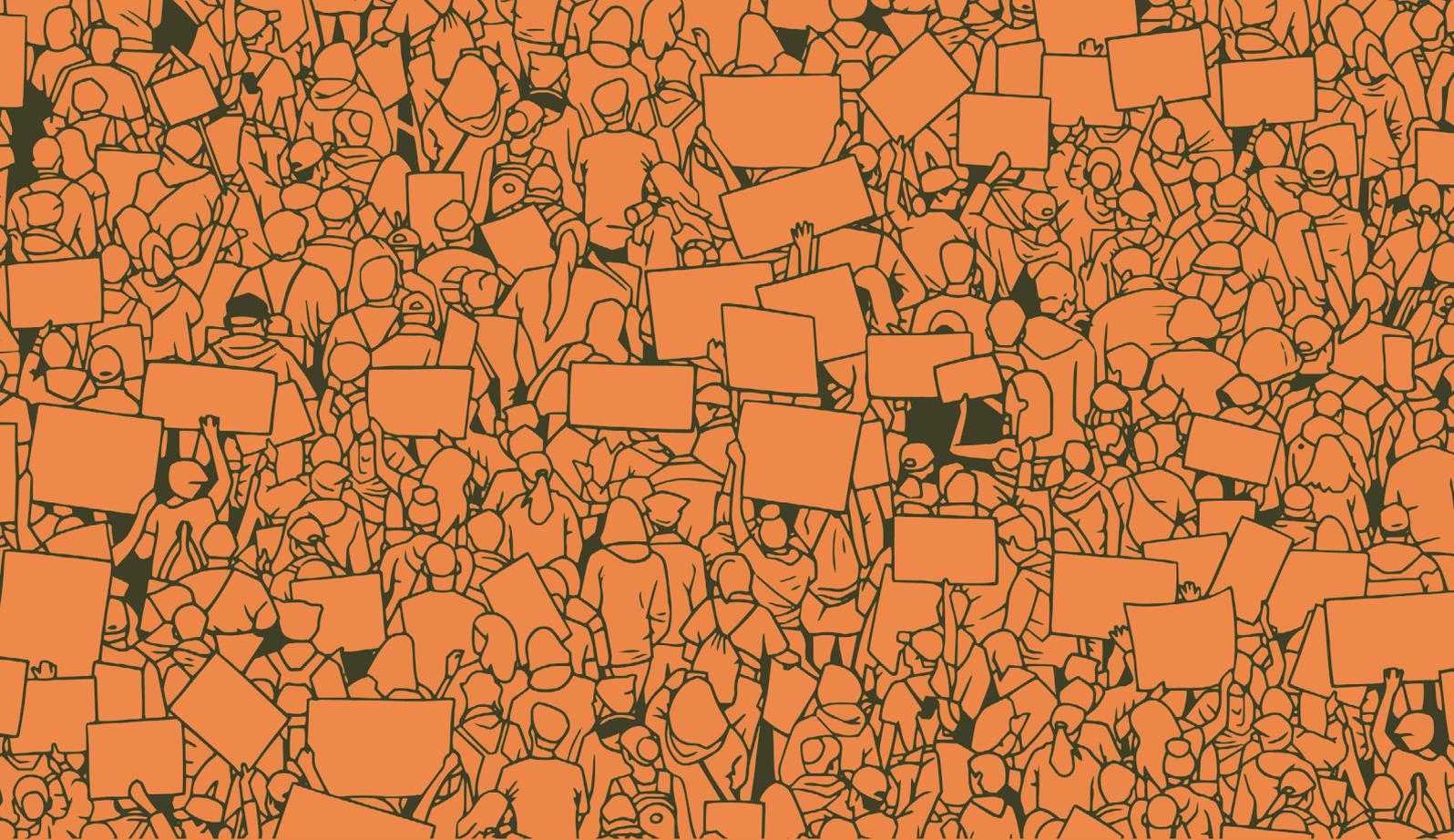
These two rights – to elections and to expression - come into play during polls, and call attention to their linkage. In democracies, voters should be enabled to help set the political agenda, and to cast their ballots freely and on a solid understanding of the contestants’ political records and programme pledges. Election outcomes and their aftermath are critically affected by political discourse and communications, including the role of the media in relation to the polling process.

Today, the contribution of free, pluralistic, independent and safe journalism to democracy is under unprecedented stress. Many societies have falling trust in established political parties and in news outlets themselves. This is often accompanied by polarizing political discourse that threatens peaceful elections as well as press freedom.

In many places, attempts by political actors to control media in elections continue to complicate the democratic role of journalism at a time when it is already weakened economically. At the same time, there is growing disintermediation of news institutions: politicians use channels other than the media to reach audiences directly, and voters share content directly amongst themselves. There is an avalanche of content other than journalism during an election, including made-up facts, anti-media rhetoric and attempts to discredit truthful news reports. In this context, the visibility and impact of professional journalism becomes potentially diminished.<sup>1</sup>

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1. See UNESCO report on World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development 2017/2018. UNESCO: Paris. 2018.



All these factors are linked to the growing centrality of the Internet during elections. Key debates have arisen about concentration of power in technology companies, as well as about their privacy-intrusive and attention-soliciting business models. Where there is constant exposure to a mass of emotive content driven by attention-economics and psychological intelligence, citizens can find themselves both polarized and paralyzed in a situation of 'information overload'. Some people resort to 'easy answers' such as adopting conspiracy theories or treating all information as equally unreliable. In many cases, individuals put blind trust in information sourced from close friends or a populist leader; in other instances, cynicism and apathy take the place of healthy skepticism and active citizenship.

In the face of this, there are increasing calls for better self-regulation by Internet companies, as well as for forms of state-regulation and multi-stakeholder regulation. Meanwhile, state intervention has taken the form of increasing internet shutdowns as well as the blocking and filtering of online content, thereby curbing access to communications and content in times of polls.

Against this complicated background, it is key to keep focus on a free, independent and pluralistic media, with professional journalism that is practised without fear of attack. This is how citizens can be supported to maneuver through murky and conflictual waters and be actively involved in an informed democracy. The distinctiveness of journalism in helping to ensure the integrity of elections, is more relevant than ever.

In this context, World Press Freedom Day 2019 will address the following sub-themes:

- 1. How the digital era is affecting electoral communications.**
- 2. New attempts to undermine media's role in democracy: Discrediting professional journalism, and disrupting Internet access.**
- 3. Media's potential to contribute to a culture of sustainable peace and democracy**

## Sub-theme 1

# How the digital era is affecting electoral communications

**E**lections coverage, whether online or offline, has long been subject to attempts to control it towards supporting one political tendency and undermining another. These manipulative efforts are now being complemented by the use of social media and social messaging to bypass as well as to undercut the credibility of professional reportage.

These changes come at a time when the Internet, for many people, has become the main site of political discussion and the main platform to obtain information. Meanwhile, data based on people's Internet use has become a highly valued currency which affords micro-targeted advertising based on computational analysis and which is also often 'below the radar' of public knowledge. Furthermore, algorithms give priority to emotive content which drives 'viral' content sharing at the expense of rational and facts-based political argument. Compounding this picture are the dramatic increases in disinformation online.<sup>2</sup>

There is currently an expectation for media outlets to constantly provide journalistic content online (while at the same time many people prefer not to pay for news). This puts strains on the quality and professionalism of reporting. Media business challenges mean that well-researched political analysis is being displaced by content that is cheaper and more opinion-based. Combined with social media's prioritization of passions like fear and anger, this can encourage voting based on attitudes, rather than by assessment of political merits.

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2. See Journalism, Fake News and Disinformation, a handbook for journalism educators and trainers. UNESCO: Paris. 2018.

The growing use of digital messaging services to influence elections also poses problems. Contrary to social media platforms, where most information is publically available, messaging services are hard to monitor and report on. There is a realm of communications which therefore escapes scrutiny for compliance with electoral regulations and standards of truth and fairness.

Artificial Intelligence is already being applied in social media content moderation. Automated chat bots are delivering propaganda material. These raise questions of hidden agenda-setting influence. Emerging debates about the ethical, technological, political, social and legal implications of the use of AI need to be linked to freedom of expression broadly, and elections in particular.

On the positive side, digital technologies are enhancing the Right to Information which is also an important issue for elections. The African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights has developed broad guidelines relevant to this topic. These recommend steps to enhance information access by Election Management Bodies, political parties and candidates, as well regulatory bodies that cover media and Internet operations. Transparency proposals are also made for Internet companies and for media institutions.

In sum, these matters all impact on existing policies and regulations for elections and for communications related to the Internet. UNESCO's value of Internet Universality promotes an Internet based on human Rights, Openness and Accessibility, and underpinned by Multi-stakeholder participation (known as the ROAM principles). This holistic and inclusive approach to internet governance draws in media, civil society, media regulation bodies, internet companies, governments and others as stakeholders. It is directly applicable to optimizing decision-making around topics like regulation and self-regulation as regards electoral-related content.

## Points to ponder:

- ▶ How can professional journalism play a more visible and distinctive role, and compete with emotive content, disinformation and private messaging during elections?
- ▶ How can transparency and the Right to Information be strengthened in relation to elections?
- ▶ In the new digital era, how should press freedom and electoral regulation apply to Internet companies, media institutions and the governance of the Internet more widely?
- ▶ What are the risks of new technologies for communications during elections, and are there ways the media could harness these tools for improved electoral reporting?

## Sub-theme 2

# New attempts to undermine media's role in democracies: Discrediting of professional journalism, and disrupting Internet access

### Discrediting journalism

Hostile discourse seeks to demean journalists and distract from their work in a number of countries around the world. Anti-media rhetoric, especially when employed by political figures and amplified on social media, can create real hazards. The UN Human Rights Council has expressed alarm “at instances in which political leaders, public officials and/or authorities denigrate, intimidate or threaten the media [...] which increases the risk of threats and violence and undermines public trust in the credibility of journalism”.<sup>3</sup> At the global celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2018 in Ghana, the UN and regional rapporteurs on freedom of expression expressed strong concern about “the resurgence of political threats to media independence such as [...] harsh attacks which aim to stigmatize and discredit the media”.<sup>4</sup>

One effect of aggressive rhetoric is to blur the line between legitimate critique of media and naked threats which violate the right of journalists to exercise freedom of expression. Yet, the safety of journalists is fundamental to whether an election can be considered as free and fair. This needs to be monitored by electoral management bodies, and be secured by the State. Rapid political and judicial responses are needed at all times to address impunity for crimes against journalists – but these are particularly relevant during an election period. Recent resolutions at the UN Human Rights Council and UNESCO have urged Member States to create monitoring mechanisms under the SDG framework in order to track the safety of journalists.

In addition to the effects of intimidation, self-censorship and physical injury or death, much rhetorical discrediting of journalism seeks to weaken the credibility of coverage – including that about misdeeds of political contestants. The term ‘fake news’ is appropriated to create confusion between truth and lies, and between realist narratives and fictional ones which are presented as if they really did happen. However, push-back against deceptions has come in the form of fact-checking coalitions, including reputable news media outlets, which have sought to improve the information environment of elections.

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3. A/HRC/39.L.7

4. UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, ACHPR Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information. 2018 Joint Declaration on Media Independence and Diversity in the Digital Age.

In the light of these developments, the potential for voter education programmes to promote media and information literacy comes to the fore. The public need to understand and cherish the safety of journalists as being an essential condition of electoral integrity. Citizens also need to be empowered to identify disinformation and the discrediting of journalism as being threats to democracy. Likewise, there is an ongoing need for media to raise awareness about, and to earn respect and trust for, its democratic role.

## Points to ponder:

- ▶ What can be done to counter rhetorical attacks on journalism?
- ▶ How can the monitoring of threats and attacks on journalists during elections be formalized and institutionalized?
- ▶ How can we strengthen implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, in times of elections?
- ▶ What are the risks and limits of regulatory responses as methods to counter disinformation?
- ▶ What can journalists and fact-checking initiatives do in order to counter disinformation and uphold fact-based political debate?
- ▶ What partnerships are possible so as to raise media and information literacy around elections?

## Disrupting Internet access

According to the NGO Access Now, at least 108 incidents of internet shutdowns took place in 2017 worldwide, and at least 81 were recorded in the first half of 2018.<sup>5</sup> Such intentional disruptions of people's ability to communicate and to access information can take the form of blocking selected communications services or social media platforms, as well as cutting off Internet access altogether.

These disruptions have been justified by governments in terms of ensuring public safety and preventing rumors and illegal content.<sup>6</sup> However, civil society actors perceive these steps as a means of suppressing peaceful protest and preventing the publicizing of abuses. For its part, the Human Rights Council in 2016 condemned steps which prevent or disrupt access to information online as being "in violation of international human rights law".<sup>7</sup>

What is clear is that arbitrary restrictions and closures of Internet access do imperil democratic processes. When implemented during election periods, they violate citizens' right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas at the very time when people are especially entitled to join debates and make informed decisions. Shutdowns inhibit both the media and election monitors from reporting on potential fraud or irregularities, and they reduce journalism's potential to dispel rumours and promote peace.

The introduction in some countries of high levies on data use and on imports of smartphones is a tax on information with adverse impact on elections. These costs leave people cut off from the pluralism of information choices and chances to voice their concerns, both of which they need during elections. The taxes therefore need to be considered from the point of view of damage to democracy, and not only (as often perceived) as a fetter on the digital economy in the country concerned.

5. Access Now, Keep It On.

6. Ibid.

7. A/HRC/32/L.20

## Points to ponder:

- ▶ At what point do Internet disruptions compromise the integrity of an election to the extent that the exercise is fundamentally flawed?
- ▶ What arguments and steps can help to push back against Internet disruptions and data taxes, particularly during polls?

An illustration at the top of the page shows several stylized human figures in various colors (yellow, purple, green, blue) interacting with a large, dark blue globe. One figure stands on top of the globe, another is on the left side, and a third is on the right. There are speech bubbles and a ladder-like structure on the right side of the globe. The background is a light purple color with some abstract shapes.

### Sub-theme 3

# Media's potential role in supporting peace and democracy

**T**he outbreak of violent conflict is often due to social factors that are exploited through polarizing rhetoric, stereotypical and/or inhuman portrayal of groups of people, and incitement to violence. Violence is also provoked and cultivated where people have no peaceful outlet for venting frustrations, where there is a lack of pluralism in narratives, and where there is an absence of reliable information that comes from professional journalism.

As recognized in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16, peace and democracy are preconditions for equitable and sustainable development. When freedom of expression and safety of journalists are protected, the media can play a vital role in preventing conflict and in supporting peaceful democratic processes. These outcomes are conditions for the realization of Africa's Agenda 2063 which envisages a peaceful and secure continent, and which calls for "an Africa of good governance, democracy, respect for human rights, justice and the rule of law".

The SDGs themselves encapsulate media's potential to promote peaceful, just and inclusive societies. SDG Target 16.10 urges UN Member States to "ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements". The two indicators to follow progress under Target 16.10 cover the safety of journalists and the legal and political guarantees to access information.<sup>8</sup> These indicators show that under the United Nations' agenda for sustainable development, the institutions of a free and safe press - able to access and disseminate information of public interest without fear of attack - are a substantive component of peaceful societies.

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8. Indicator 16.10.1 "Number of verified cases of killing, kidnapping, enforced disappearance, arbitrary detention and torture of journalists, associated media personnel, trade unionists and human rights advocates in the previous 12 months" and Indicator 16.10.2, "Number of countries that adopt and implement constitutional, statutory and/or policy guarantees for public access to information".

Conflict-sensitive reporting<sup>9</sup> can focus on common ground between groups and help explain the underlying causes of tensions. Through carefully researched and in-depth reporting based on many sources, instead of one-dimensional discourse and images which can fuel conflict, journalism can contribute to a strong civil society that stands against violence. In this way, journalism can also be a force for reconciliation before, during and after polls - especially in post-conflict situations.

By bringing communities together, by giving a voice to people on the various sides of a conflict, and by showing how people on each side suffer the consequences of violence, journalism can help estranged groups to get back together. In addition, media can signal peaceful solutions to social conflicts, and uphold the value of free and fair elections as a key mechanism for conflict resolution. Gender-sensitive coverage can also highlight the importance of the inclusion of women in peace making.

### Points to ponder:

- ▶ In a polarized context, how can media with different political leanings come together such as in a voluntary electoral code of coverage that defends against capture, upholds professional standards and eschews incitement?
- ▶ Can social media business models be re-engineered to reduce the ramping up of emotions, and avoid filter-bubbles and disinformation, which can be factors in elections becoming engines of conflict rather than peace?
- ▶ How can electoral management bodies support free, impartial and professional journalism, and journalistic safety, during a poll - while also avoiding prescriptions that could intrude on press freedom?

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9. See Conflict-sensitive reporting state of the art: a course for journalists and journalism educators. UNESCO: Paris. 2012.

## Conclusion

Free, independent and professional journalism - both online and offline – serves an essential role in democracies. It provides information that allows citizens to make informed decisions inside and outside the voting booth. It holds the powerful to account for the integrity, peace and fairness of an election. Journalism can also contribute to the electoral agenda by requiring politicians to respond to the public, and to focus on subjects of real public interest. These subjects include the SDGs – a common cause that is agreed by the global community - which range from advancing peace and human rights through to ensuring gender equality, combating poverty, creating sustainable cities, and countering climate change.

Journalism can be a beacon in a storm of information where unchecked lies are disseminated and emotions are whipped up to the detriment of a culture of peaceful conflict resolution. In reconciliation processes, conflict-sensitive journalism can play a pivotal role. It can bridge divides through accurate reporting, break down stereotypes, cover human stories and present solutions. Such journalism can help prevent polarization, violence and war.

The place of free and fearless journalism, online and offline, in times when elections are threatened by discrediting rhetoric, information deception, internet disruptions and violent conflict should therefore be defended vigorously. Informed citizens, who understand the current complex global political environment, are likely to feel more empowered to exercise their democratic rights and accept outcomes of free and fair elections. This is not likely to be the case when journalism is thwarted from playing its role.

World Press Freedom Day 2019 is a major opportunity to advance the agenda of deepening democracy and sustainable development in digital times.

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