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THE BIG CONVERSATION ON THE STATE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IN EUROPE TODAY

The Big Conversation on freedom of the press, organized in collaboration between Beursschouwburg and Goethe-Institut Brüssel, was scheduled on 31 October 2020 in the framework of the Freiraum Festival, a pan-European hybrid festival on the state of freedom and the state of the arts in Europe today, in Corona times. Due to the new covid-regulations of 24 October 2020 in Brussels, it had to be cancelled.

The "Big Conversation" is a participatory, experimental discussion format. Ten tables with one expert and 10-15 guests, one topic per table, two rounds and an intense and intimate debate in a safe space on the topic. The expert gives an introduction of 5-10 minutes and then debates with the guests for 50 minutes.

Freedom of the press in Europe today:

In recent years, press freedom has been declining around the world while the danger journalists face has been on the rise. Europe has not been spared by this trend as the European Council has described the situation in Europe as "alarming". In light of these trends, we will be asking opinion-makers to draw upon their specific backgrounds, contexts and expertise to start a dialogue with you about the ideas that are improving or worsening worldwide press freedom. Together we will pursue questions vital to freedom of the press: What are the challenges of securing the freedom of the press today and what are the challenges you specifically encounter in your daily practice and working conditions? How did/do those conditions alter in your home country or other countries you have worked in?

Invited journalists and experts from NGO and institutions:

Julie Majerczak – Reporters without borders (European)
Catherine André – VOX Europe (European)
Karl Van den Broeck – Apache.be (BE)
Béatrice Delvaux – Le Soir (BE)
Quentin Noirfalisce – MEDOR (BE)
Gia Abrassart – freelance journalist (BE)

Bleri Lhesi – freelance journalist, MO* (ALB)
Niklaus Nuspliger – NZZ (CH)
Matthias Krupa – Die Zeit (DE)
Alia Papageorgiou – Association of European Journalist (GR)
Cecilia Sundberg – European Parliament, Media Services Unit (EU)
Moderation: Bouchra Lamsyeh & Petar Sarjanovic

CATHERINE ANDRÉ – VOX EUROPE (EUROPEAN)Statement about denouncing censorship, alerting on sensitive issues and the fight against self-censorship:

Threatened throughout the world, freedom of the press and freedom of expression are both foundations of democracy and a good barometer of the state of individual freedoms in a country. These freedoms are also threatened today in Europe, a region that I cover more specifically in my work as a journalist and co-founder of a European media company.

Press freedom is not only degraded and trampled underfoot in some member states with autocratic regimes or tempted by illiberalism. It is also in the old democracies, in a subtler way. The challenges are many, and range from the courage to denounce censorship, wherever it intrudes, to the importance of alerting on sensitive issues (environmental scandals, health issues, human rights, inequalities, etc.) even when pressure from political or economic powers is exerted. As journalists, we must also be careful to fight against the self-censorship that all too easily lurks around us. At Voxeurop, we regularly publish the work of press cartoonists, it is one of our trademarks, and they are often threatened in the exercise of their profession. Publishing their work and supporting them is a strong commitment to freedom of expression. We must not give in to the use of humor and satire.

I will present to my interlocutors in this big conversation, on the one hand, the most serious threats to press freedom that I perceive today in Europe, with concrete examples that I have experienced, and the differences in approach between countries - in Sweden, among others, where the press continues to be considered a pillar of democratic life.

Journalist and co-founder of Voxeurop SCE, polyglot. She graduated from the University of Lille in sociology, from Science Po Paris and holds an MSc in European Studies from the London School of Economics. She was deputy editor in chief of Courier international in charge of Europe. She has been a correspondent in Sweden and has worked for several economic magazines, including Alternatives Economiques, where she remains deputy editor-in-chief.



BEATRICE DELVAUX – LE SOIR (BE)

Statement about the ownership and financial situation of the media, the profiles of journalists, and importance of education & role models

1) The ownership of the media

Who's the owner, who's the publisher? Only professional editors, who are exclusively working in the editorial field can guarantee their journalists the freedom to investigate and publish their work, without having to deal with an aim other than serving the information. Otherwise, the conflict of interests, the need to please the political or economic power in place to get advantages for the "other businesses" of the publisher are unbearable and force the newsrooms to compromise between the need to publish accurate information with the other interests of their shareholder. Many examples prove that evidence all around the world.

2) The financial situation of the media

The sound equilibrium of the financial situation is crucial. Editors in chief or publishers under financial pressure lose their ability or possibility to resist to external intimidations.

It also makes it much more difficult for them to recruit the talents, the competences needed to produce the highest quality, or to allow the time to complete in depth stories.

3) The profiles of the journalists

The complexity of the world, the technologies and the networks at stake induce the need of journalists with top profiles, coming not only from the communication departments of the universities or schools dedicated to journalism, but also from engineer, chemistry, law, economic... sections. We need journalists who can deal with complexity, with numbers, with sophisticated financial or technical constructions.

4) The time (and the pertinent content) given at school to analyze and decrypt any information, historical, scientific, artistic, political...

Less hours to study hundreds of pages, more hours to analyze, criticize, put an information, a personage in context and perspective.

5) Role models

Lucky you, who have met at school, in your family, in books... role models who inspired, astonished, fascinated you with their bravery, independence, honesty, idealism, commitments and passion.



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*Graduate and master in economic and social sciences from the Facultés Notre Dame de la Paix in Namur (graduated in 1983). Internship at the International Monetary Fund in Washington (1983-84). Joined the newspaper LE SOIR in December 1984, in the political service. Head of the economic department (1989). Author of the book *Le bal des empires* with Stefaan Michielsens of the Standaard (Racines editions), devoted to the ups and downs of Belgian capitalism. December 15, 2001 - June 7, 2011: Editor-in-chief of Le SOIR. Columnist at the Standaard. Editor-in-chief of Le SOIR since June 2011.*

BLERI LHESI – FREELANCE JOURNALIST, MO* (AL)

Statement about a journalism going beyond the constraints of economy and marketing:

“If you believe what you read in mainstream media we are indeed doomed. In order to sell as much as possible mainstream media has become one of the main sources of fear in our society. Journalists often have no choice as what matters to the shareholders of the media is profit. This is why according to my opinion one of the main challenges for media today is to go beyond this framing and show the reality as it is. Meaning attention for the beautiful, inspiring things and stories happening in the world.”

Bleri Lleshi is philosopher, lecturer at UCLL, author of various books and has written for different national and international media.



JULIE MAJERCZAK – REPORTERS WITHOUR BORDERS (EUROPEAN)

Statement about 5 crises in the world affecting the future of journalism:

“When I started working for Reporters Without Borders four and a half years ago, I was often told: 'ah yes, great, but what exactly do you do?'. I felt a kind of skepticism about my usefulness, about the need to defend press freedom in Europe.

Since then, there has been the referendum on Brexit in June 2016 and the election of Trump as leader of the United States in November 2016, who has since regularly referred to journalists as "enemies of the people". There was the murder of Maltese investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia in October 2017 and then the murder of Slovak journalist Jan Kuciak four months later, both killed because they were investigating corruption. And these murders are only the tip of the iceberg.

Today, when I say that I work for RSF, I am often told: 'we really need you'. There is an awareness that press freedom is being abused in Europe and that journalism is going through a crisis that threatens our democracies.

We are entering a decade that will be decisive. Five crises are simultaneously affecting the future of journalism: geopolitical (aggressiveness of authoritarian models), technological (lack of democratic guarantees), democratic (polarization, repressive policies), confidence (suspicion, even hatred towards news media) and economic (impoverishment of quality journalism) crises.

More than ever we need a free and independent press in Europe, one that reports the facts, denounces abuses, holds governments accountable, and informs citizens.

It is no coincidence that the road to authoritarianism usually begins by silencing critical media.

The defense of trustworthy journalism - that is, free, independent and rigorous journalism - is a major challenge in our democratic societies.”.

Julie Majerczak is the Reporters Without Borders Representative to the European Institutions. She has represented the international press freedom NGO at the EU level since May 2016. Before joining RSF, Julie was a journalist for 16 years. She moved to Brussels in 2002 to report on EU affairs for the French daily newspaper Libération for which she worked for ten years. She also reported for the French daily newspaper Le Parisien, RTL radio and the online media outlets Contexte and Novethic. Before that, Julie worked in politics as an MEP assistant and as a political adviser to a French environment minister. Born in Paris, she has a Master in Law and is a graduate of Sciences Po Paris.



QUENTIN NOIRFALISSE – MEDOR (BE)Statement about criminalization of journalists and building a resilient approach towards independent journalism:

Throughout 2018 and 2019, I had the bad luck to be sued by a Belgian company whose board director was aimed at in one of my articles about illegal logging in the DR Congo. I received a letter at home, asking me for 50 000€ (to start with) in compensation. As a freelancer, I received full support from the media I published in. The content of the article was fact-checked and correct. A few weeks after that, a bailiff ringed at my door, with a full complaint against me (not the media). Then a one-year process started, with everything it means in terms of indirect pressure for me and my family. Helped by a lawyer, in a normal judiciary process, it ended with a total win. Some of my colleagues have been abusively sued by companies and politicians they covered in a fair way. Often, the people we wrote about did not even care to reply to our questions before publications, choosing the legal path instead of the freedom of expression path. They did not ask right to reply. Criminalization of journalists, often by companies, is a worrying trend throughout Europe. The aim: targeting freelancers, or media, to gag them in long and costly procedures. This is a worrying trend in Western European media. But an even more worrying trend is what happens in media such as in Hungary, where the pressure and the threats don't go through law firms but directly to the journalists themselves. What happened, as we thought before, only in far-away countries, plain dictatorships, is now coming closer to democracies who have not been able (or willing) to build stronger barriers to protect the press or recognize the input of investigative journalism as a real counterpower and fact-checker. As media tends to be increasingly considered by those in power as mere means of communication, we need to build a more resilient approach towards what independent journalism means and to build bridges and support networks (and actual support in itself) towards journalism, on a global scale, on risk to lives on the frontline of the uttermost important topics of our times: environmental and human rights abuses, war, racism, police abuses, nationalism and so on.

Quentin Noirfalisse is a Belgian investigative journalist and director. He is a co-founder, journalist and editor of Médor, a print and digital magazine of literature, culture, and politics published four times yearly, for which he writes on environmental issues in Sub-Saharan Africa and corporate responsibility around the world. For Dancing Dog Productions, a company he co-runs, he directed the documentaries GEEK POLITICS and THE MINISTER OF GARBAGE which were selected in several international festivals and screened in more than 10 countries. He recently produced Saint-Nicolas est socialiste (Audience award and Grand Prix at the Brussels International Film Festival), and co-produced AFTER THE CROSSING (selected at the Berlinale, Visions du Réel, Hot Docs Toronto) and BREATHLESS, a documentary about asbestos victims in India and Belgium (2019 Ensor for Best Flemish Documentary).



ALIA PAPAGEORGIU – ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN JOURNALISTS (GR)

Statement about the effects of digitalisation, impunity in Europe and the lack of sustainable business models for hyper local press:

What are according to you the challenges of securing the freedom of press today and what are the challenges you specifically encounter in your daily practice and working conditions?

“There are two ways to look at journalism, one is as a business. Profit over values and margins over training and maintenance of standards. Then, there is looking at journalism as a service, a public service which acts as a gateway, a community and, yes, a guard dog of democracy watching for any bites on from the steely teeth of power and business to its skinny ankles.

Now, freedom of the press to me means being able to have access to, review and seek out the truth in order to report it without fear and without promise to anyone for the content. This area of the world has gone through digitization in the past decades alongside all businesses bringing new stresses and challenges.

Questioning the role of the press and politics grows as do attacks on journalists. On October 16, 2017, Daphne Caruana Galizia was murdered in Malta for investigations that are still ongoing today with the Daphne Project in order to silence her. The trial for those responsible is still not resolved.

We have seen a shift to click bait journalism, sensationalist pieces online to capture attention, propelled by social media to create an atmosphere of uncertainty as to what is truth and what is not. A small education on how to read the news is not always there and therefore this becomes the norm. In my view, disinformation and how to spot it is key to future press freedoms.

An increase in the unaccountability of politics, influence over the press, and attacks on the press are mounting at dizzying heights. It is a cliché already but a White House Press Room singling out and not allowing coverage to some media outlets is an attack on press freedom of the most visible order.

In Belgium an observatory has been set up on the increasing law cases rising against journalists and their newspapers. In Italy Ossigeno Internazionale is also an observatory one that specifically works and documents the lives of journalists covering the mafia in Italy who have 24-hour security details in order to be able to work for fear of attack.”

How did/do those conditions alter in your home country or other countries you have worked in?

“In every country I've worked in as a journalist the question that creates the most tension is the balance between commerce and facts. Whether this becomes transactional or not is the strength of any newspaper (or website/media) and editor. I have always worked at newspapers and they are my example.”



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Feel free to suggest another topic related to press freedom that might seem urgent or relevant to you.

“Impunity is the death knell of our decade, the stakes are higher, the press is so weakened by digitalization and a lack of finding a sustainable business model that the local newsroom or even a hyperlocal set of people documenting their neighborhood would find it impossible to subsist.

And yet the courtrooms need watching, the parliaments which increasingly show contempt for the votes entrusted in them and veer towards private opinion need watching and the streets with those protesting the current situation need watching!

Who is to pay for those watchers who at the end of the day sit down and write what they saw?

Without threats of jail, their words are replaced by shiny digital adverts and ‘communications’ from well-organized institutions?”

Alia is the Spokesperson for the Greek Greens Prasinoi.eu. Prior to this she was the Communications lead at REVOLVE, and before this press officer at the EU Delegation to Australia. Her work includes EU projects, social media roles in tech, running Brussels’ Twestival, and a long career in journalism which spanned Melbourne, Athens and Brussels. She is currently the Vice President of the Association of European Journalists in Belgium and a member of the board at Press Club Brussels.



KARL VAN DEN BROECK – APACHE.BE (BE)Statement about the internet as curse and blessing for the media:

Traditional media are caught in a perfect storm. The mobile internet (smartphone, tablets, Wi-Fi, 4G, social media) have killed the economic model of newspapers, magazines and broadcasters. Two sources of income went dry: people don't want to pay for news anymore and companies give their money to Facebook and Google to promote their goods and services. This has led to important consolidations: big publishers are eating small publishers. Titles disappear. Newsrooms are laying off journalists by the dozens, and the quality of the articles you read as well as the reporting you see and hear in mainstream media is declining.

But the internet has made it much easier to start your own (digital) newspaper or magazine. All over the world independent media is popping up, investigating scandals, informing citizens and telling wonderful stories in text, video and podcast.

Independent media is democracy's hope for the future because it reflects the polyphony of voices and opinions in society. The collapse of the economic model of traditional media has made it impossible for the free market to guarantee a pluralistic media landscape. Media is known for selling the privacy of its readers to compete with Facebook and Google. They are selling their soul to the devil.

Only when, citizens, democratic (local) governments and avid readers join forces, a robust source of revenue can be found to sustain a more diverse, more democratic and more professional media biotope.

Apache is a powerful example of 'a good practice' that can inspire others.

Chief editor of Apache.be, a platform for investigative journalism based in Antwerp. Coordinator of Agora, platform for debate and discussion at BOZAR in Brussels. Former chief editor of Knack Magazine and journalist for De Morgen. Writer of The real father of the Pii and Why I want to save the indians.

