



These cartoons were drawn in Tunisia, Tunisia by local cartoonist Belkhamza Chedly during UNESCO's main celebration of World Press Freedom Day 2011.

Toolbox IV: The special role of journalism and journalists in freedom of **expression**

When we talk about freedom of expression, we also have to talk about the special role of journalism and journalists in freedom of expression. Essentially, journalists are the most common link between what is happening in the world and the newspaper readers, television viewers, radio listeners, or online news readers. Good journalism provides factual reports and also insightful analysis to aid the readers in understanding current affairs and decision making.

Key Concepts:

- Watchdog for the people
- Freedom of the press
- Safety of journalists
- Issue of impunity
- Press council

Journalism and journalists are also known as the fourth estate after the executive, judiciary and legislative branches of the government. The term fourth estate is often attributed to Sir Edmund Burke, 18th century British political philosopher and statesman, who purportedly said in 1841 “there were three Estates in Parliament, but in the Reporters Gallery yonder, there sat a fourth Estate more important than they”¹³. The fourth estate is the check and balance in the system. Being the “check and balance” means they are supposed to ask tough questions, expose any wrong doings, and help keep the people in power honest.

1. Watchdogs vs. Lapdogs

Because of the check and balance function of journalists, they are sometimes called the “watchdog for the people”. They are expected to keep an eye on the ones who have the power in the government and in the society. Nevertheless, journalists and journalism in general sometimes fail to uphold this special role. We know this is happening when, for example, journalists would report only on the “good” stories, highlighting exclusively success and achievements, such as the building of a new bridge, a new road, or a new water treatment plant. Or perhaps the journalists would give too much column space for politicians and their campaign slogans and claims. While it is important to report on these news items, it is not good journalism to report only on these news items. Another sign the journalists are not doing their job properly is over reliance on official statements, sometimes to the extent of being almost verbatim or word for word, without providing alternative sources of information, without fact-checking, without investigation, and without questioning. In general, quality journalism should always present at least two different and credible sources of information.

2. Free Press

In order of journalists to perform their function as the “check and balance”, the “watchdog for the people” or the “fourth estate”, they must have freedom of the press. This means they are allowed to print and publish news reports without outside (political or financial) interference or fear of reprisal or persecution. They must also have access to information in order to obtain material for their report or to verify their

report. However, the matter of simply “reporting the truth” is not simple at all. In many countries, reporters are constantly under threat for doing their job. The following are excerpts of what some journalists, academics, and human rights activists have to say about press freedom:

“A free press is like a tornado that uproots the roots of corruption, collusion, and nepotism, which have taken firm hold in Indonesia. This very same tornado has also blown away 30 years of authoritarian rule by Soeharto...that is why a free press makes authoritarian regimes afraid”

(Lukas Luwarso, former chairperson of the Alliance of Independent Journalists, Indonesia)¹⁴

“A free press is the cornerstone upon which all other freedoms rest. It is the key underpinning of democracy... without a free press, who is to check on government? And without a press free to inform, how is a citizen to make intelligent political judgment?”

(Louis D. Boccardi, former President & Chief Executive Officer of Associated Press)¹⁵

“Press freedom means to me more than anything else. Without press freedom, there can be no peace in the world. Freedom of expression means no fear and threats from governments, monopolies, proprietors, and advertisers. A tall order—but it must be achieved”

(Peter Galliner, former director of International Press Institute)¹⁶

“I have a thought that if a press is free, the development of a country is also free and smooth, it also helps people feel free. The free press is a kind of mirror in which people look at themselves to know what the national public opinion thinks of those who rule their country”

(Florent Sogni Zaou, Journalist and Undersecretary General for the Congolese Observatory for Freedom of Press)¹⁷

3. Safety of Journalists

The safety of female and male journalists and media workers is increasingly being threatened around the world. In 2009, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), reported 74 journalists who were murdered because of their work, making it the highest number of deaths in a single year since the publication of the records in 1992. Overall, more than 500 journalists and media workers have been killed in the past decade. The number is very high when you consider that the journalists are simply doing their job—being the link between what is happening on the ground and the public. Journalists are an important part of freedom of expression. In addition, many more journalists, both male and female journalists, are put in prisons without following proper legal procedure, simply because they were reporting on “sensitive issues”. There is also an increasing number of sexual attacks carried out especially to intimidate female journalists.

The safety of journalists is a basic prerequisite for press freedom and freedom of expression. Journalism is the oxygen of democracy and killing a journalist is the ultimate form of censorship. If there is no safety for journalists, there will be no sustainable journalism and ultimately no viable democracy. The safety of journalists is an issue that affects us all. Every aggression against a journalist is an attack on one of our most fun-



FAST FACTS: On 23 November 2009, thirty two journalists and media workers were killed in a single day in Ampatuan, Philippines while covering the local election. It was the worst single day attack on journalists on record¹⁸

“The failure to prevent the killing of journalists and attacks on the media means that governments and authorities around the world are depriving you, me and everyone else of a fundamental right guaranteed to us by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - that of freely receiving and imparting information and ideas.”

damental freedoms. Press freedom and freedom of expression cannot be enjoyed without basic security for journalists.

The Director-General of UNESCO issues official condemnations to the killings of journalists and unjustified imprisonments of journalists. UNESCO condemns the killings of journalists and media workers because journalism has a special role in our society and in the development of a country and this role must be given the protection it deserves.

As we have discussed in the previous sections, journalists, investigative journalists are especially likely to face dangers during the course of their work. Sometimes, they are harassed and intimidated by government officials, beaten or murdered by drug cartels and organized criminal gangs, or threatened by local politicians.

The number of journalists killed or imprisoned worldwide (2000-2011)¹⁹

Year	Killed	Imprisoned
2000	24	81
2001	37	118
2002	21	139
2003	42	138
2004	60	122
2005	48	125
2006	57	134
2007	67	127
2008	42	125
2009	74	136
2010	62	145
2011	46	179

4. Self-regulation of the media

Sometimes news, articles, columns, reports in the media written, in broadcast, print online can be inaccurate. For example, a news article has the wrong spelling of the name of a person, or the dates and location wrong. Sometimes it could be a more serious negligence such claiming something had happened or claiming someone did something when in reality it did not happen. It is certainly not a good trend for quality journalism and the public if information in the press system or other media system is always wrong or inaccurate. In the long run, this would mean that the press could lose its credibility and people will have a hard time deciding on what to believe in and to trust in the media. This would have a chain-effect in the overall freedom of expression, press freedom, and functioning of a healthy democracy.

There are several ways of “correcting the system”. One way would be to have laws enacted by law-makers. Most countries have some form of media laws especially concerning licensing of broadcasting, privacy issues, intellectual property rights, etc. It is also possible to take the legal route and bring matters to the court, which could be very expensive and lengthy.

Another alternative that is gaining wider acceptance and popularity is “media self-regulation”, which as the name suggests is about regulation of the media by the media itself²¹. Self-regulation could take the form of an in-house Ombudsman²² who is someone appointed by the media organization to be a neutral ‘referee’ who will review complaints from readers, listeners etc. An Ombudsman is usually someone who is highly-respected in the society such as a retired judge or academic professor. Another possibility is self-regulation through a Press Council.

Press Council is the most common form for a self-regulatory body in the media system. Mainly composed of media professionals, Press Councils should be independent of political power. Their main task is to deal with complaints about the work of the media, through collective decision-making of the council members. “By doing this, they offer guarantees to the public about the quality of information it receives, demonstrate that media professionals are responsible, and show that extended state regulation of the media is not needed. Each established press council is unique, the result of its country’s particular history and media environment.”²³ Some Press

Councils may confine themselves to hearing complaints, while others may also play a more proactive role, monitoring the state of journalism, lobbying for an enabling environment for the media, and offering training.

Ideally, a Press Council is established through the efforts of the media practitioners, NGOs and the members of the public with minimal interference from the government. This is to maintain the independence of the council from political influence and their “moral authority”. Sometimes, press councils receive funding from the government but it does not mean the government could dictate the policy of the council.

The Press Council gives its opinion on a complaint and publishes its decision. This could be done through a website or a professional magazine for journalists. In addition, the press council should also widely circulate its decisions by sending them to the national news agency and to several other media in order to be published or broadcast.

Toolbox IV Activities:

What can you do?

Follow up on cases of killed journalists and media workers in your country.

Find out if there had been incidents where journalists and media workers in your country were attacked. Go to websites dedicated to the safety of journalists, such as:

- The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)²⁴,
- Reporters sans frontières (RSF)²⁵,
- UNESCO Condemns Killing of Journalists²⁶

Follow up on what has happened to those cases. Had the cases been resolved? Had the perpetrators been apprehended? Had the cases been presented to the courts? What are the international reactions to these cases? What are the local reactions to these cases?

Form your own Model Press Council

By now you have learned that journalism is the oxygen of democracy as well as the cornerstone of freedom of expression. But do you know how to ensure that journalists practice quality journalism? When a dispute arises from what is printed on newspaper, how can it be resolved amicably? Actually, these are some of the questions that could be resolved through an independent Press Council.

How to get it started?

Gather a group of people to form the council members (no more than 8-15 people, and making sure that there is a good gender balance). The council members are the ones who will decide on media disputes. The Model Press Council should be represented by three interest group—media owners, journalists, reporters, editors, etc. and also the public which may include well-respected citizens.

Remember:
A press council does not really have the power to force anyone to do anything and therefore its efficiency depends on the cooperation of all groups involved.



What is Impunity?
“The failure to prevent the killing of journalists and attacks on the media means that governments and authorities around the world are depriving you, me and everyone else of a fundamental right guaranteed to us by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights - that of freely receiving and imparting information and ideas.”²⁰

What is needed to form a Model Press Council?

A Model Press Council, just like a real council, must have a set of responsibilities and a set of journalistic ethical standards or code of ethics²⁷ which will be the guiding principles for the council, especially in its deliberations and decision-makings. It is important to remember that the code of ethics and set of responsibilities differ from country to country and also depend on the human resources, financial resources, and the socio-historical context of the country as well as political will.

Scenarios of Media Disputes/Complaint:

[You may find it helpful to search for actual examples of local print articles and radio or television programmes that could be used in Press Council deliberation]²⁸.

The following are fictional scenarios of common complaints and dispute brought to the Press Council of an imaginary country called Zangara. The details may be different, but the problems are similar:

The national labour union has brought a complaint to the Press Council about a Zangara Times news-

paper article on 20 December 2011 that had published inaccurate information about the union. The newspaper had mistakenly published a report claiming that the labour union will go on a strike.

The Ministry of Information has brought a complaint against the ZANGARA TV²⁹, a local television station, for airing a special series which reports on the corruption in the government. The Ministry argues that the program embarrassed and defamed several high-ranking officials and demands that the television station issued an apology and stop future broadcast of the programme. ZANGARA TV defends the programme and the accuracy of the facts.

A prominent business man has complained to the Press Council about a front-page article in the Zangara Times on 14 January 2012. He claims that various assertions, including the headlines and a caption under an accompanying photograph which was taken many years ago and out-of-context, failed to meet journalistic standards of accuracy.

Similar to the real Press Council, the decisions made by the Model Press Council should also be widely distributed. For example, they could be made available in the school newspaper or the school common bulletin board.

Toolbox IV Summary

Journalism and journalists are also known as the fourth estate which provides a check and balance of those in power.

Journalists are sometimes called the watchdog for the people.

Journalists must have freedom of the press in order to perform their function of “check and balance”, the “watchdog for the people” or the “fourth estate”.

The safety of journalists is increasingly being threatened around the world.

The safety of journalists is a basic prerequisite for press freedom and freedom of expression.

Impunity happens when attacks against journalists are not investigated and the perpetrators are not brought to justice.

Press council is the most common form for a media self-regulatory body.