

Submission of Evidence to the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy

Question: What lessons can we learn from the UK's international delivery over the past 5 years? Which are the key successes we should look to develop and build on, and where could we learn from things that didn't go well?

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Summary

1. We are a team of **academic researchers** who have been studying the UK's Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF)¹ since it was formally launched by the FCO in July 2019.
2. We have interviewed 50+ civil servants and international stakeholders about the campaign. We have also analysed news coverage; and surveyed media practitioners and campaigners².
3. Our research shows that **the campaign is 'shining a spotlight'** on threats to media freedom. Moreover, civil society groups see it as a welcome *symbolic* development.
4. However, to date the campaign has only taken **limited steps** towards its more significant goal of 'raising the costs' for states and individuals who threaten media freedom.
5. We believe that **media freedom issues should be mainstreamed across the UK's foreign policy work** and that the GCMF should be developed and expanded in the coming years. This is because (i) There has never been a more important time to take action to support media freedom; (ii) The UK is uniquely well positioned to do this work. (iii) With resourcing, attention and political will, the GCMF can help to shift the needle on this fundamental issue.

¹ The Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF) includes a coalition of 37 countries seeking to promote media freedom, a High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom and a Global Media Defence Fund, administered by UNESCO. The overarching goals of the GCMF are to: 1) shine a global spotlight on the issue of media freedom and 2) increase the costs for those who attack media freedom (FCO 2019a).

² For further details of the research study and team, please visit: www.pressfreedom.co.uk The study is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK and the Global Challenges Research Fund. It is based out of City, University of London and the University of East Anglia, with international academic collaborators in The Philippines and Sudan.

Findings I: Shining a spotlight on media freedom?

1. Our research shows that the GCMF has **helped to shine a spotlight on media freedom**, generating a significant amount of new news coverage and social media commentary³. Notably, it has generated more coverage than most other international media freedom initiatives.
2. However, **this spotlight was fleeting**. Media coverage was primarily focussed on the inaugural Global Media Freedom Conference in London in July 2019. The GCMF's other initiatives generated very little media attention.
3. The GCMF did not appear to raise the profile of media freedom issues beyond its own campaign activities. In addition, media attention focused on well-known personalities; especially Amal Clooney and Jeremy Hunt.

Findings II: A welcome development?

1. Our initial interviews show that there was **considerable excitement** about the launch of the GCMF among civil society groups. A campaigner from one NGO said: "The MFC has great potential. It's the most exciting effort in recent times in our area."
2. Interviewees also believe the UK has been relatively **successful at building a willing coalition**. In our survey of 66 media freedom practitioners from 25 countries in the Global South, a majority (61%) of those familiar with the GCMF agreed that 'it is helping to defend media where it is under threat around the world'.
3. As another NGO representative said: "In times of global fragmentation and rise in right wing polity - solidarity is the best form of defence for expression and media freedom".
4. However, there is also considerable cynicism among interviewees that the campaign is, at present, **primarily symbolic** and that it will not be sustainable over the long-term, **unless it is supported by adequate funding and high-level political support**.
5. As a representative from one African CSO said: "It will have to fund local journalists' rights defenders to make this a reality in our countries."
6. Another international campaigner said: "I am sceptical of the motivation for having a conference and [since the conference] the inaction of the media freedom coalition has been unsurprising but disappointing."

Recommendations

1. The issue of media freedom should **remain at the centre of UK foreign policy**. In fact, attention to this issue should be mainstreamed across the FCDO's work – including, for example, within the global Covid response - for the following reasons:
 - (i) Freedom of the press is under attack globally. 2018 was the deadliest year on record for journalists, and world leaders continue to threaten the

³ See: *Shining a spotlight on media freedom? Media coverage of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom*, posted on the research project website, www.pressfreedom.co.uk. The research included an extensive analysis of the news coverage and social media commentary of media freedom generally, and the activities of the GCMF specifically, from July 2019 to July 2020

news media⁴. Reversing these trends is an urgent issue because **media freedom is a vital building block to securing other democratic rights**, and has been shown to help nations work towards sustainable development goals⁵. The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated the fundamental importance of media freedom; for public health communications, for combating myths and disinformation, and for improving government transparency.

- (ii) **The UK is ideally positioned to take leadership on the issue**, with its longstanding commitment to press freedom and the rule of law. The current absence of international leadership from the United States in this area, means the UK's role is particularly vital.
- (iii) Our early assessment shows **the GCMF has established a wide-ranging, novel approach to media freedom work**. It has the potential to compliment, rather than replicate, the existing work of other international initiatives in this area. However, since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a strong perception within international CSOs that its momentum has stalled. Therefore, injecting new momentum into the campaign, and maintaining this momentum in the longer-term, is vital.

In addition to embedding media freedom issues across its foreign policy - we also recommend that UK government's approach to media freedom should consider adopting a **broad understanding of media freedom** that looks beyond journalist safety and issues of impunity. It is particularly important to consider the increased economic fragility that threatens the survival of public interest media, and the potential erosion of rights that could follow.

⁴ Reporters Without Borders (2018) "RSF's 2018 round-up of deadly attacks and abuses against journalists – figures up in all categories" December 14, 2018. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsfs-2018-round-deadly-attacks-and-abuses-against-journalists-figures-all-categories> [accessed 10 September, 2020].

⁵ Scott, M. (2014) *Media and Development*. Zed Books: London.