



Whose media freedom is being defended? Norm contestation in international media freedom campaigns

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Abstract

This article analyses how international advocacy campaigns approach and define media freedom, and what influences this process. It does this through a two-year case study of the Media Freedom Coalition—an intergovernmental partnership of over 50 countries—that included 55 interviews with key stakeholders, observations, and document analysis. This revelatory case sheds light on how norms of media freedom are constructed and contested on the international stage, and their implications for journalists, media freedom and geo-politics. We show that the Coalition adopted a state-centric, accountability-focused, and negative understanding of media freedom. This discourse legitimized a narrow, reactive, and “resource-light” approach to supporting media freedom, focused on “other” countries. We argue that critical norm research provides a helpful prism for understanding this Coalition’s operations, and the global politics of media freedom more generally. These findings have important implications for understandings of “norm entrepreneurship,” “media imperialism,” and “media freedom” itself.

Keywords: media freedom, international norms, critical norm research, discourse analysis, media imperialism,

In the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of intergovernmental initiatives seeking to support media freedom and journalist safety. For example, the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (UN Plan), adopted in 2012, aims to create a free and safe environment for journalists, “by strengthening the legal mechanisms available... [and] building partnerships to introduce and harmonize safety mechanisms” (UNESCO 2012). In 2019, two new intergovernmental partnerships were established—the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) and the International Partnership on Information and Democracy—aiming to “advocate for media freedom and safety of journalists” and “promote democratic principles in the global information and communication space”, respectively (MFC 2020). In December 2021, these and other similar initiatives were further strengthened by the US-led Summit for Democracy, which focused heavily on supporting free and independent media. At this summit, the United States made a significant financial contribution to the new International Fund for Public Interest Media (IFPIM) and committed to increase its engagement with the MFC.

This growing constellation of international initiatives are a welcome response to the increasing threats to media freedom and journalist safety around the world. According to Reporters Without Borders’ 2022 World Press Freedom Index, a record 28 countries are classified as “very bad” places for journalism, including Belarus, China, Saudi Arabia, and Russia (RSF 2022). In “illiberal democracies” such as Poland, “the suppression of independent media is contributing to a sharp polarisation” while in democratic societies, such as the United States, media polarization is also “feeding and reinforcing internal social divisions” (ibid.).

Despite the growth of these international advocacy campaigns, there is a surprising lack of consensus about what “media freedom” actually means and how it should be promoted. As Tambini writes (2021, p. 129): “Put bluntly, whilst there is considerable diplomatic activity and standard setting on Media Freedom, there is little agreement on definitions.” Definitions matter because they inform where media support funds are directed, and how diplomatic and political capital is spent. For example, campaigns and advocacy groups which define media freedom “negatively”—as the ability of media actors to operate free from external restrictions—may focus their efforts on reducing physical or legal threats to journalists. In contrast, others define media freedom “positively,” as the ability of media actors to produce news content, and so focus on providing financial or logistical support to journalists (Lichtenberg 1990; Tambini 2021). Furthermore, different interpretations of media freedom are associated with different ideological perspectives. As a result, international media freedom initiatives can either reinforce or challenge wider liberal democratic norms on the international stage.

It is therefore important to critically interrogate the design and objectives of international media freedom campaigns and ask—what kinds of media freedom are they promoting and whose priorities do they serve? In this article, we analyze one of the most recent and important international advocacy campaigns—the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC)—which has not yet been examined by researchers. We ask how the MFC approaches and defines media freedom (RQ1), what implications this has for the journalists they seek to support (RQ2), and the reasons why the MFC adopted this particular definition of media freedom (RQ3)?

We approach “media freedom” as a social norm, or a “standard of appropriate behaviour for actors with a given

identity” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 891). We view the deliberations within the MFC as a form of “norm contestation,” where actors compete to influence which forms of behavior are considered acceptable (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998, p. 897). Questions about the role and influence of international norms are often integrated into studies of the politics of global communications policymaking (Iosifidis 2011). They were also widely researched in the 1970s, during debates about a “New World Information and Communications Order” (NWICO). Since then, however, there has been limited analysis of how international advocacy campaigns seeking to promote norms associated with media freedom, understand this issue, the dynamics which shape their understandings, and their political implications.

Established initially by the UK and Canada, the MFC describes itself as a “cross-regional collaboration with 52 countries... working together proactively to advocate for media freedom at home and abroad” (MFC 2022). It does so by “raising individual cases... making collective statements... [and] diplomatic approaches... supporting members to improve protections for the media... [and] supporting the [UNESCO-led] Global Media Defence Fund” (Terms of Reference 2022) (see [Supplementary File](#) for further details). In an official response to this research, UNESCO characterized the MFC as “unique and a first” and “a real shift in international relations in this area,” because it is the first “coalition of member states gathered around the specific topics of media freedom and the safety of journalists... at the highest political level” (Multilateral representative 2).

The MFC was chosen as a “revelatory” case study (Yin 2003) because it was primarily designed to influence international norms. As its founder, UK Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt told us, “This is really about... the priority that countries who are developing their democratic institutions give to a free media... To win the argument that a free media should be part of what all countries aspire to.” Although the idea of “norm diffusion” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998) is not explicitly mentioned in the MFC’s original Terms of Reference (2020), it is implicit throughout in references to “mak[ing] the case for the fundamental importance of media freedom” and “bringing... abuses of media freedom to the attention of the global public”. As we make clear throughout this article, the MFC sought to achieve this primarily by adopting a “naming and shaming” approach via its public statements, which targeted countries such as Belarus, China, Egypt, the Philippines, and Yemen. This stigmatizing approach reinforces international norms by marking certain actors or behaviors as deviant through processes of labelling, stereotyping, separation, and discrimination (Adler-Nissen 2014). Examining the MFC’s creation and early years helps to reveal its internal power dynamics more easily because a strong internal consensus about its remit and approach was not yet established.

To assist our analysis, we adopt the principles of “critical norm research,” which maintains that international norms are shaped by the interplay of power structures and agency, within a social system (Epstein 2008). We argue that this discursive approach provides a helpful lens to understand how contested concepts like “media freedom” are defined and shaped by different individuals, groups, values, and dynamics on the international stage. For example, it allows us to demonstrate that the MFC’s discourse on media freedom was shaped, not only by states’ “cost-benefit calculations based on power politics” (Lamer 2018, p. 76), or the values and agency

of Hunt, acting as a “norm entrepreneur” (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Rather, it was a product of a complex combination of these factors alongside existing international norms, in the context of important social relations. For this reason, this article begins with a critical review of conventional, sociological approaches to norms within International Relations (IR), followed by an overview of the key principles of critical norm research. We then explain our approach to studying the MFC—through 55 interviews with relevant stakeholders; observations of key events; and textual analysis of all relevant documents. In our analysis, we show that the MFC consistently defined media freedom in terms of physical and legal threats to individual media workers in nonmember states and that these definitions have direct implications for state identities, policy making, and resource allocation.

Literature review

Media freedom from a constructivist perspective, within international relations

The concept of “norms” has become central to a constructivist perspective within IR, which emphasizes the role of ideas and identity-related explanations of state behavior. Most constructivist norm literature within IR adopts a sociological lens, which views the world as socially constructed through human action (Engelkamp and Glaab 2015). Through this lens, scholars have developed various theoretical frameworks to show how norms emerge, spread, and influence behavior, such as the “spiral” and “norm lifecycle” models (see Finnemore and Sikkink 1998; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). In one of the few studies to apply these models to media freedom, Relly and González de Bustamante (2017, p. 91) develop a multi-stage model of norm diffusion. Based on a study of transnational advocacy for journalist safety in Mexico, their model suggests that if international Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and other states work with domestic actors to pressure a government, this can help move societies through various stages until the final “ideal-type” phase in which the government adheres to “policies developed to protect journalists from violence” (ibid.).

Despite the widespread adoption and apparent utility of these sociological models within IR, they have also been criticized for two main reasons. First, while these models may offer a relatively dynamic account of the creation, diffusion, and socialization of norms such as “media freedom,” they tend to view norms themselves as internally stable “things” that remain relatively static. For example, Relly and González de Bustamante (2017, p. 92) argue that the internalization of the norm of journalist safety, “would be demonstrated when a government... adheres to policies that emulate global human rights norms.” However, they do not acknowledge that the concept of “journalist safety” is fluid and contested and that government policies must therefore establish *who* is responsible for protecting *which* media workers, from *what kinds* of violence. Krook and True (2012, p. 106) argue that this static, singular view of norm content is problematic, “because it limits the ability to explain how and why norms change as they diffuse... and why they often fail to attain their intended goals.”

Second, these sociological approaches within IR are often actor-centric: assuming that, “change is brought about by actors,” who are themselves driven either by powerful

“principled beliefs” or “knowledge” (Epstein 2008, p. 92). This “agent-centrism” (ibid.) is particularly apparent in studies of “norm entrepreneurs,” who are “presented as moral subjects, who . . . act strategically, but bound by empathy, altruism and an ideational sense of duty” (Engelkamp et al. 2014, p. 69). For example, in their explanation of the international “surge in attention” to the issue of sexual violence in conflict, Davies and True (2017, p. 713) highlight the “crucial role” role of former UK Foreign Secretary, William Hague, who initiated a Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI) in 2012. They argue that a combination of his “strongly held convictions” and personal experiences in Darfur were central to “persuading others to adopt the norm” (ibid.).

This emphasis on individual agency within some studies of international norm diffusion has been criticized for neglecting the influence of “the existing power distribution [between actors], the international structures created by pre-existing norms and sovereign calculations of interests made on strategic, military or economic grounds” (Wylie 2016, p. 34). For example, another review of Hague’s PSVI concluded that while, “survivors call for long-term interventions that address the deep-rooted causes and effects of sexual violence. . . most PSVI projects are subject to the FCO’s one-year funding cycles [so] focus on symptoms and short-term fixes” (ICAI 2020, p. 3). Indeed, studies of domestic policymaking regularly draw on sociological and discursive institutionalism to highlight how policies are shaped by power relations and institutional conditions (Ali and Puppis 2018). Thus, while a conventional, sociological approach may have dominated norm research within IR, it provides only a partial account of the spread and influence of norms such as media freedom.

Critical norm research and media freedom

Given the critiques of a conventional, constructivist approach within IR, we emphasize instead a critical, *discursive* understanding of international norm diffusion. From a post-structuralist perspective, discourse refers, not simply to language, but to a system of significations and representations that reproduce certain ways of understanding of the world (Fairclough 1995). By privileging some interpretations over others, discourses reproduce, or challenge, existing power relations by regulating which forms of action are considered legitimate (Foucault 1970). In this context, norms are understood as “sense-making practices. . . anchored in language and revealed by repeated speech acts” (Krook and True 2012, p. 105), which help regulate behavior by rendering things such as “journalism” meaningful to us in particular ways (Epstein 2008).

The starting point of this critical, discursive approach is an acceptance that norms are inherently fluid and ambiguous, carrying different meanings in different contexts. This dynamic understanding of norms has been repeatedly highlighted by research into journalists’ and media freedom advocates’ understandings of the concept of media freedom (Voltmer and Wasserman 2014; Rupar et al. 2019; Palmer 2021; Tambini 2021). Empirical studies identify two recurring paradigms: liberalism and social responsibility. While the liberal paradigm understands media freedom as a purely negative freedom, or as a freedom *from* restrictions, a social responsibility perspective highlights journalists’ freedom *to*, or a positive freedom (Lichtenberg 1990; Freedman 2008). For example, in their study of Czech and Serbian journalists, Rupar et al. (2019, p. 1438) show that while media freedom

was, in theory, described as a positive freedom, because “professional ethics matter the most,” in practice, journalists said that a need for freedom *from* “external political control” (ibid.) was most important.

Tambini (2021) outlines the emergence of these two dominant cultures of media freedom, with the negative approach more common in U.S. law, where the first amendment protects freedom of expression from the interference of the state. In contrast, Europe and many multilateral organizations tend to place greater emphasis on positive rights. In 2012, for example, the European Court of Human Rights found that the Italian Government had a positive obligation to ensure media pluralism by helping broadcasters enter the market (Tambini 2021, p. 136). Similarly, the International Fund for Public Interest Media emphatically links media freedom to sustainable funding models, noting that news media are currently facing an “extinction event” and that the threat to media freedom “is both political and economic.”

These two paradigms also differ in their interpretations of the role of government. The liberal paradigm primarily equates “freedom” with the absence of government interference (Lichtenberg 1990; Freedman 2008). For example, in her analysis of digital discourses of the International Press Institute (IPI), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) during Covid-19 pandemic, Palmer (2021, p. 9) found that “each represented government authorities as the primary aggressors against journalists covering the pandemic.” According to Palmer (2021, p. 15), this “reductive focus on government threats” is problematic because it “belies the myriad other threats to press freedom that exist today. . . from big corporations, from news audiences, and from news executives.” In contrast, the social responsibility paradigm maintains that some funding and/or regulation by the state is often required to ensure that the media are able to serve their societal purposes. This view of state informs European public service journalism models, for example.

Regarding the media’s societal functions, the liberal paradigm emphasizes their democratic role, particularly as “watchdogs” that monitor the government on behalf of citizens, to promote transparency and accountability. To achieve this, it assumes that media should be “privately owned and operate in a laissez-faire system of a free market economy” (Schneider 2020, p. 26). Drawing on the work of John Milton and John Stuart Mill, a liberal approach also emphasizes that, by facilitating a free marketplace of ideas, a free media is necessary for finding “truth” (Freedman 2008). By contrast, the social responsibility paradigm maintains that the media should serve a much wider range of social, cultural, and political needs in society, and may require interventions to help them achieve this. For example, Voltmer and Wasserman (2014, p. 187) find that many journalists in Namibia and South Africa are concerned that an overly commercial media system might lead to “the dominance of professional news values that tend to favour the elite at the expense of the socially marginalized.” Similarly, journalists they interviewed in South Korea and Taiwan were concerned that a free marketplace of ideas might “foster irrational discussions. . . an excess of adversarialism” and “undermine social coherence” (Voltmer and Wasserman 2014, p. 188). As a result, when press freedom is tied to social responsibility, “this might even require certain restraints on what can be published” (ibid.).

This dynamic understanding of the norm of media freedom has also been illustrated by studies of international politics. For example, Richter (2016, p. 135) has analysed the “terminological mess” regarding what is considered “communication” within international agreements since 1945. He concludes that media freedom has variously been characterized as equivalent to, overlapping with or subservient to the norms or “freedom of expression” and “freedom of information.” Similarly, Berger (2017) shows that the understanding of media freedom used by UNESCO has gradually expanded since the end of the Cold War, to encompass six distinct but interconnected dimensions. These now include independence, pluralism, freedom—and more recently—gender, Internet (access) and safety. Given this, it may be useful to treat the concept of media freedom as a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005), because while the signifier itself has remained relatively stable, the meanings it refers to have not.

A critical approach to norms also highlights how power is “integral to the processes of social construction, determining what can and cannot be said—and, as a result, who can and cannot speak” (Krook and True 2012, p. 108). Such contestation may “expand or deepen the norm, ignore or misunderstand the norm, and even reverse or empty the content of the norm” (ibid.). A focus on discursive power is evident in some previous studies of media freedom, which have argued that definitions of the term, and attempts to promote it, are embedded in wider ideological and geo-political struggles (Nordenstreng 2011). For example, Freedman (2008, p. 58) argues that media policymaking in the United States and the UK is heavily underpinned by liberal narratives of media freedom, which emphasize a “marketplace of ideas,” and “a seemingly absolutist stance.” Furthermore, these narratives have been used to justify giving powerful media institutions the same speech rights as individuals, which ultimately reinforces the “thoroughgoing neo-liberalisation of... media systems” (Freedman 2008, p. 23).

Similarly, during the Cold War, nonaligned countries argued that a dominant, liberal perspective on media freedom was part of a wider set of discourses about freedom of information, which privileged the interests of powerful Western countries and companies, who were better able to benefit from a free flow of information (Sreberny-Mohammadi 1984). This contributed to chronically unbalanced global communication flows, which undermined the media industries in the Global South. In this context, the liberal view of media freedom was accused of contributing to “media imperialism,” or the exercise of power through global communications (Boyd-Barrett 2015). In contrast, Western actors accused advocates of an alternative New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO), of supporting a “responsibility” approach to media freedom as part of a “smokescreen” for legitimizing state control (Nordenstreng 2011). Ultimately, the re-distribution of geo-political power after the end of the Cold War meant that demands for a NWICO declined and a consensus around a liberal interpretation of media freedom, amongst other things, was re-established. Nevertheless, this “global media debate” demonstrated that the dominance or even naturalization of a particular meaning of “media freedom” is neither inevitable nor inherently “good” or “bad,” but an “effect of power” (Epstein 2008, p. 13).

However, some studies which examine the structural determinants of media freedom discourses have adopted what

Banda (2009, p. 354) describes as a “crude political-economic approach,” which reduces the complex interactions of the interests and identities of different actors to mere political-economic calculations. For example, Lugo-Ocanda (2020, p. 7) argues that foreign aid for media development is part of a wider “hegemonic projection of power and post-colonial attempt at nation-building... orchestrated by the West to achieve geopolitical and ideological influence.” Although Lugo-Ocanda (2020, p. 4) rightly highlights that journalistic norms are locally contested, he also describes efforts to “expand cultural hegemony” as a product of “deliberate” and “intentional” efforts by the “Global North.” This focus on strategic intent obscures the “dynamic and bloody processes” (Epstein 2008:11) of norm contestation.

Instead, a critical, discursive approach to norms regards structure and agency as co-constitutive. As Bourdieu (1993) argues, while external structures are internalized into actor’s habitus, actors’ behaviors also help to constitute the social relations in a field. For instance, although it is up to a state to decide whether to join an inter-state coalition, once it does, it becomes tied to a social system, which partly regulates how it perceives its own interests and identity (Brysk 2009). Indeed, following Bourdieu (1993), Epstein (2008) argues that there is an important social dimension to states’ interpretations of their interests and identities, and subsequent behaviors, which political-economic approaches regularly overlook. She explains that, “an actor’s interests are not predetermined; they are constituted within a social field... [and that] the mechanisms of this belonging become central to the actor’s perception of its own interests” (Epstein 2008, p. 6870). According to Berger (2019, p. 2), such social dynamics are key to explaining recent consensus at the UN on the issue of journalist safety; because “if states did perceive [journalist] safety as something enabling others to ‘beat them up upon’, then they would not have agreed to the host of UN resolutions to date.” Berger (2019, p. 2) adds that, “in this light, it would be erroneous to reduce the UN’s normative work in this area to particular political and economic power interests.”

A final key feature of critical norm research, absent from many previous studies of media freedom, is an emphasis on the role of actors’ identities in shaping, and being shaped by, norms. Within a critical, discursive perspective, identities refer, not to actors’ inherent subjectivity, as in conventional constructivist approaches, but to the “subject-positions” actors adopt by speaking a particular discourse. A subject-position describes the position within a discourse which actors speak from to mark who they are—both to themselves, and to others (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Adopting a subject-position, carved out by a discourse, does not necessarily mean that actors have internalized an idea, but rather, that they are seeking to accomplish something by claiming this identity. For example, in her study of international discourses on whaling, Epstein (2008, p. 218) demonstrates that adopting an anti-whaling discourse allows states to embrace a subject-position that, “serves to cast oneself as an ethical, green, civilised, and democratic state.” Furthermore, Towns (2012) reminds us that subject-positions are also exclusionary and hierarchical. By marking out an identity for the self, subject-positions also produce a contrasting, often inferior identity for an “other” who is cast as adopting undesirable behavior and is therefore lower down in a social ranking. Palmer (2021, p. 13) identified evidence of this in her analysis of IPI, CPJ, and RSF’s digital discourse which, “overwhelmingly

focussed on press freedom violations in Asia, Africa, Latin America, or Eastern Europe.” This, Palmer (*ibid.*) concludes, is evidence of “subtle ethnocentrism.”

In summary, critical norm research emphasizes the fluid and dynamic nature of norms, which are shaped by the interplay of power structures and agency, within a social system. But despite its apparent value in addressing the limitations of conventional, sociological approaches within IR, it has not yet been fully applied to the study of international advocacy campaigns relevant to media freedom.

Method

Our ambition in this research is to better understand how intergovernmental initiatives seeking to support media freedom approach and define media freedom (RQ1), what implications this has for the journalists they seek to support (RQ2) and what shapes these understandings (RQ3). We address these three research questions through a multimethod study of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), over a two-year period, beginning in July 2019. To do so, we draw on document analysis (RQ1), semi-structured interviews (RQ2, RQ3), and observations (RQ3).

During this period, the MFC was co-chaired by the UK and Canada, who also hosted the first and second “Global Conference for Media Freedom” in London, (July 2019), and online (alongside Botswana, November 2022), respectively. The other members of the MFC primarily consisted of democracies in Europe and North America, although Argentina, Costa Rica, Ghana, Honduras, the Maldives, and Uruguay were also members, as were less democratic members including Afghanistan and Sudan. Other bodies associated with the MFC include: the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom (High Level Legal Panel), co-chaired by the UK’s Special Envoy on Media Freedom, Amal Clooney, which provides the MFC with “recommendations. . . to prevent and reverse abuses of media freedom” (MFC 2020); the Consultative Network (CN) which consisted of 17 CSOs that “monitor the work of the coalition. . . and present cases to the MFC for action” (*ibid.*); and the Global Media Defence Fund, led by UNESCO in support of the UN Plan, and supported by members of the MFC (see [Supplementary file](#) for an organizational diagram and full list of MFC members).

We use discourse analysis to identify and untangle the power relations and political implications of the MFC’s understanding of “media freedom” (de Almagro 2018). Drawing on Fairclough’s work (1995), we understand discourse analysis as a set of approaches to analyzing linguistic and social practice, within their socio-political context, with the aim of denaturalizing institutionalized patterns of knowledge and highlighting their role in reproducing, or challenging, societal power relations. Unlike a conventional constructivist approach, our aim is not to trace the process by which the MFC sought to diffuse the norm of “media freedom” and its relative success in doing so. Rather, it is to use the contestation over the meaning of “media freedom” as a lens for understanding whose interests were served by this process. Furthermore, we are not seeking to identify an inherently “better” way of understanding media freedom—but to identify the intended and unintended consequences that flow from the MFC’s discourse. A critical norms perspective places emphasis on the significance of power structures, and also their interaction with actors’ agency and identity, in the

context of important social dynamics. Fairclough’s (1995) three-dimensional framework is particularly appropriate for this task as it combines a focus on textual/linguistic analysis (micro-level interpretation), institutional production (meso-level), and wider socio-political contexts (macro-level).

Drawing on Fairclough’s work, Milliken (1999) identifies three key dimensions of discourse analysis within IR, which align with our three research questions, and which we use to structure our analysis. First, we analyzed what Milliken (1999) describes as the study of discourses as “systems of significations,” to understand how the MFC defined “media freedom,” and to address our first research question (RQ1). To achieve this, Researcher 1 analyzed the language used within all publicly available documents produced by the MFC between July 2019 and June 2021. This included its original terms of reference, the Global Pledge on Media Freedom, which all members must sign, and the first seventeen joint statements it published (see [Supplementary file](#)). Researcher 1 also analyzed all public statements about the MFC made by Ministerial representatives, including speeches, press releases and social media posts. These were identified through a combination of online keyword searches and an extensive keyword search of the electronic database held by the media monitoring service, Kantar (see Myers et al 2022). Finally, we analyzed all publicly available documents relating to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee’s ongoing inquiry into the FCDO’s Media Freedom Campaign, of which the MFC was one part, including all 38 original submissions, the inquiry’s reports and the FCO’s responses. To help denaturalize the MFC’s discourse we also compared it with that of the UN Plan. In examining these texts, we paid particular attention to rhetorical devices, such as metaphors, repetition, and predication, or the attributes given to the subject of a sentence, as this helps reveal the subject-positions produced by a discourse (Milliken 1999).

Second, to assess the implications of the MFC’s discourse on media freedom, and address our second research question (RQ2), we analyzed what Milliken (1999) describes as the study of “discursive productivity,” or how discourses structure and limit policy practices. According to Milliken (1999, p. 240), the main weakness of such analyses—especially when carried out as part of a purely political economy analysis—is that they are often based exclusively on either “scholarly reasoning,” or an analysis of policy formulation, rather than implementation. To address this, our analysis is based on 55 semi-structured interviews with representatives of all major stakeholders involved in, and affected by, the MFC’s design and implementation. In the UK, this included the Foreign Secretary, the UK’s Special Envoy on Media Freedom, Amal Clooney, all relevant senior civil servants, and most members of the Global Media Freedom team within the then Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO). We also interviewed representatives from ten other MFC member states, 23 national, regional, and international CSOs—including most members of the Consultative Network—and representatives of relevant multilateral organizations. We also interviewed a government representative from a country targeted by the MFC in a joint statement (see [Supplementary file](#) for a full, anonymized list of interviewees). Interviewees were selected based on their association with the MFC, and to ensure a diverse range of perspectives. Interviews took place between August 2019 and March 2021 and generally lasted between 0.5 and 1 hour. Common interview questions were used by all four

researchers to ensure consistency. Anonymity has been maintained by numbering participants using generic job titles. Most interviews (63%) were conducted via video calls, with the remaining 37% conducted in person. Ethical approval for all primary data collection was obtained from City, University of London.

Third, to understand what shaped the MFC's discourse on media freedom (RQ3), we examined what Milliken (1999:242) refers to as the "play of practice," or explanations of the production of discourse. To achieve this, we drew on our interview data and on observations of public and private MFC meetings. These observations are important for understanding social dynamics, the relative influence of different actors, and for triangulating with our interview data. We observed the first two MFC Global Conferences in London and online (Researchers 1, 2, and 3) and three "roundtable" consultations between CSOs, the UK and Canada, held in London and online (Researcher 3). The MFC's co-chairs also gave us permission to observe a private meeting of MFC Senior Officials in Geneva, Switzerland (Researchers 1 and 3), on condition that information collected from this meeting was kept confidential.

NVivo software was used to analyze all interview transcripts, field notes from observations and documents. Our analysis focused on what Krook and True (2012, p. 110) characterize as the "internal" and "external" sources of dynamism that shape international norms, including their interaction with the "broader universe of existing norms" and debates between and within member states about competing meanings. During data collection, the research team communicated about emerging themes. Researcher 1 used these discussions to generate codes for the analysis, which were then reviewed by the other researchers. Data analysis was led by Researcher 1 and proceeded sequentially through the RQs.

A final key feature of a discursive approach to studying international norms is a need to reveal and reflect on our own positionality, or how our worldview and subjectivity, combined with the scholarly conventions we conform to, help shape the conduct and write-up of our research (Engelkamp et al. 2014). Three of the four authors of this article are based in the UK and have longstanding professional and personal connections to international actors in the field of media freedom advocacy. Given this, although we have sought to maintain a critical distance from the dominant values and assumptions within this field, it is likely that our analysis remains partly shaped by these largely liberal perspectives. We hope, therefore, that readers will be as critical of our own discourse as we have sought to be of the MFC's.

Analysis

Our analysis is structured according to the three research questions. It starts with an analysis of MFC documents, to establish how media freedom was defined (RQ1). Subsequently, we ask what implications this discourse had for the MFC itself, and for the journalists it seeks to support (RQ2), drawing on interviews with key stakeholders. Finally, we identify the complex influences that helped produce this discourse (RQ3), drawing on interviews and observations.

How did the MFC define "media freedom"?

The MFC's discourse focused almost exclusively on negative freedom. Every MFC joint statement contained references to

"defending" or "protecting" media freedom from various "restrictions" or "threats". Journalists were repeatedly described as "facing various forms of repression" (Statement 14: 2021) and "undue interference" (Statement 10: 2020), which "severely restrict[s] them from doing their job" (ibid.). These "threats" were also consistently described as "growing" or "increasing" (Statement 3: 2020). For example, in the MFC statement on World Press Freedom Day 2020, journalists were described as, "facing increasing danger in a growing number of countries." As a result, the MFC described itself as working at a "critical time" when "protecting" media freedom was "more important than ever" (ibid.).

This emphasis on negative freedom was reinforced by the frequent use of war-related metaphors. Media freedom was repeatedly characterized as being subject to "attacks," "threats and aggression," "violations and abuses," and "crackdown." The UK's MFC coordinator even described journalists, and the MFC itself, as being on the "frontline" of a "battle between facts and falsehoods" (Hossein-Bor 2020). The theme of war even dominated the imagery associated with the MFC. The most used image during the inaugural MFC conference, for example, was of a journalist in a helmet and flak jacket. In contrast, within the UN Plan (UNESCO 2012, p. 8), the issue of journalist safety is also tied to elements of positive freedom such as "improving journalistic skills" and providing "adequate remuneration."

Within MFC documents, "threats" to media freedom related almost exclusively to journalists' safety and legal constraints. The MFC's Global Pledge (2020), for example, states that journalists are "increasingly confronted in their vital work by restrictive laws, punitive legal measures, and physical violence." It later argues that "we must take into account all areas that affect media freedom" but only mentions "encouraging enabling regulatory environments" and "promoting transparency in judicial processes." On the rare occasions that "financial threats to media independence and sustainability" (Statement 10:2022) were mentioned in MFC statements, these were described as "exacerbating" (ibid.) legal constraints and threats to journalists' safety.

This emphasis on physical violence and psychological attacks was also reflected in the MFC's "gender-responsive approach," which focused almost exclusively on, "sexual and gender-based violence, harassment, online and offline attacks, stalking, and intimidation" (Statement 10: 2020). There were no references to structural issues such as workplace discrimination, pay inequalities, and gender imbalances within newsrooms. This is also the case within the UN Plan. The issue of impunity, or failures to investigate and prosecute crimes against journalists, was frequently highlighted by the MFC as being "of paramount importance" (Statement 8: 2020) to journalist safety because, "a climate of impunity perpetuates the cycle of violence against journalists" (Statement 9: 2020). Interestingly, the MFC often referred to journalist safety separately to media freedom, describing itself as working to "advocate for media freedom... and the safety of journalists" (Statement 1: 2020).

The MFC's discourse on media freedom was also overwhelmingly state-centric—just as Palmer (2021) found in her analysis of IPI's, RSF's, and CPJ's digital discourses. "Governments" and "authorities" were repeatedly described as being primarily responsible for both threats to media freedom and for protecting journalists. As is stated in the MFC's

Global Pledge (2019), “too often, it is governments who are the source of threats to media freedom. . . . Where governments are not the source of the problem, they often fail to provide the solutions needed.” Indeed, ten of the first sixteen joint statements by the MFC referred to specific cases of abuses of media freedom by named governments. The only nonstate actors ever mentioned were “social media platforms and search engines. . . . terrorist groups. . . . [and] criminal organisations” (Statement 10: 2020). Although governments were also foregrounded within the UN Plan, it adopted a much stronger multi-stakeholder approach—identifying specific actions to be undertaken by different UN Mechanisms, CSOs, professional associations, news organizations media owners, editors and journalists, policy makers, and academia.

On occasion, the MFC described media freedom as being of “fundamental importance” (Statement 2: 2020) for “just, peaceful and inclusive societies” (Statement 1: 2020) and for “economic development and prosperity” (Statement 10: 2020)—though without providing any further illustration or explanation. Instead, the MFC framed journalism’s societal function primarily in terms of its contribution to human rights and democracy. Restrictions on media freedom were repeatedly described as “attacks on human rights” (Global Pledge 2019), not only because, “they entail attacks on the human rights of journalists” (*ibid.*), but also because media freedom is “essential to the protection of human rights, by making the facts about human rights violations and abuses public” (Statement 10: 2020). Thus, media freedom was characterized as “underpinning. . . . [and] essential for exercising human rights” (Statement 1: 2020).

Media freedom was also repeatedly described as “fundamental,” “vital,” and “essential” to a “functioning democracy.” Its contribution to democracy was understood primarily in terms of an ability to “hold authorities to account” (Statement 14: 2021) directly, or “serve as a watchdog for the public interest” (Statement 10: 2020) by “providing people. . . with accurate information and informed analysis to hold governments to account” (Statement 7: 2020). This accountability discourse was also reflected in the MFC’s dominant framing of its own purpose: as being to “hold to account” (Terms of Reference 2020) “those who harm journalists and severely restrict them from doing their job” (*ibid.*), primarily by “joint lobbying on cases” (*ibid.*). However, unlike the UN Plan, which recognizes that, “democratic institutions [are required] to support free, independent and pluralistic media” (2012, p. 2) there was no recognition of the reciprocal relationship between democracy and media freedom.

In summary, the MFC adopted a state-centric view of media freedom in which individual journalists increasingly needed government-led protection from physical and legal attacks by state authorities—to promote human rights and democracy.

What are the implications of the MFC’s discourse on media freedom?

The main implications of the MFC’s discourse on media freedom stem from the clear, consistent, and strategically valuable subject-position of “democracy defenders” it offered member states. The focus on individual journalists increasingly needing protection to perform their role of watchdogs, positioned MFC states as “defenders,” not only of media freedom, but of democracy and human rights. Furthermore, by characterizing

their own actions as “holding authorities to account” (Statement 14: 2021), or as equivalent to those of the journalists they sought to defend, the MFC presented itself as similarly “vital” to democracy’s “defence” (*ibid.*).

The MFC’s discourse also produced a contrasting Other: the “abusers of media freedom” (Senior civil servant 12). The “authorities” which the MFC sought to stigmatize were repeatedly described as “governments of countries where media freedom is at risk” or “abused” (Terms of Reference 2020). Furthermore, by repeatedly “condemning,” “demanding” and expressing “alarm,” and “deep concerns” about their actions and by “calling on” or “strongly urging” them to stop “threatening” media freedom, the MFC adopted the position of moral arbiter, with the legitimacy to police the norm of media freedom. Doing so conferred moral superiority on MFC members, over their Other (Towns 2012). For example, the MFC characterized China as having “more. . . . journalists in detention. . . . than any other country in the world” (Statement 13: 2021)—implicitly placing it at the bottom of a social hierarchy.

This process of othering and establishing moral superiority was especially clear within the discourse of some individual MFC members. For example, in a statement at the ministerial meeting on Media Freedom at the UN General Assembly 2019, UK Minister Lord Ahmad characterized the MFC as “a force for good” with a “moral imperative. . . to champion media freedom.” Similarly, in a statement to the second MFC conference in 2020, Kosovo’s Minister for Foreign Affairs described Serbia and Russia as “media freedom foes” (Haradinaj 2020), in contrast to her country, which held “one of the best regional standings” (*ibid.*) in media freedom.

According to representatives of MFC states, the opportunity to adopt this subject-position of “democracy defender” was a key reason why they joined the coalition. Specifically, MFC membership enabled states to mark themselves, and obtain recognition from other states, for being both advocates and exemplars of media freedom, democracy, and human rights. As one respondent told us, “a lot of it is about positioning ourselves as an international actor. . . . I want a free media to be part of our identity” (Senior civil servant 7). For this reason, many interviewees described joining the MFC as a “natural” or “obvious” decision; because it helped demonstrate that media freedom was an important part of their international and/or domestic “political profile” (Senior civil servant 3). As one respondent put it, “we are very high in all the [media freedom] rankings. . . . [so] our first instinct was to join immediately. . . . to show this [has] been a very big. . . priority of ours” (Senior civil servant 12).

In addition, state representatives often described MFC membership as helping them to “promote an image of a nation” that was “up to scratch when it comes to civil and political rights” (Senior civil servant 1). This was especially the case for newly elected governments which, as one official put it, “want to demonstrate that they are different from the previous government and. . . show they are better in terms of human rights records” (Civil servant 8).

This subject-position appears to have been particularly appealing as the MFC membership grew relatively rapidly. In its first eighteen months, the MFC gained fifteen new members. By comparison, the International Partnership on Information and Democracy, which was established at the same time, recruited only four new members, over the same period. As one MFC state representative explained, “it’s definitely going well because. . . the membership is growing very fast. . . . That

shows that this topic, and how it's done, is the right one" (Senior civil servant 12). In turn, this relatively large membership added greater legitimacy to the MFC's joint statements, enhancing the effectiveness of its stigmatizing strategy.

The production of a favorable subject position for MFC states relied upon a state-centric discourse, as this emphasized both members' own importance and the significance of the actions taken by the governments they sought to stigmatize. However, a state-centric discourse inevitably minimizes the importance of nonstate actors, such as social media platforms, in shaping media freedom. It also de-emphasizes the role of local state authorities, which, according to [Carey and Gohdes \(2021\)](#) have far greater responsibility for violence against journalists than national authorities. Furthermore, by repeatedly framing the state in terms of negative freedom—as a “threat” to journalism—the MFC's discourse downplayed the idea that, in some circumstances, state support for the media could be legitimate or desirable.

In addition, the MFC's stigmatizing approach and production of a subject-position of “democracy defenders” necessitated an emphasis on external rather than internal accountability. The MFC was regarded by many Consultative Network members as, “very ineffective at holding its own members to account” (CSO representative 15). During our eighteen-month document analysis, the MFC issued no public statements of concern about any of its own members, despite “serious incidents threatening media freedom in... Coalition countr[ies]” (Terms of Reference 2020) including Afghanistan, Slovenia, Sudan, and the United States. There was also little evidence of “internal peer-to-peer review” mentioned in the MFC's Terms of Reference (2020), or uptake of advice and recommendations from the independent High Level Legal Panel (although this period did coincide with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic). Such internal accountability, if done publicly, could have undermined member state's subject-position because it would have questioned their status as exemplars of media freedom, democracy, and human rights. In doing so, it might also have partly compromised their stigmatizing approach by undermining their legitimacy to act as moral arbiters of the norm of media freedom ([Adler-Nissen 2014](#)). The MFC's narrow focus on extreme cases of threats to safety and legal threats also helped render such internal accountability largely unnecessary.

Focusing almost exclusively on the most egregious cases of physical and legal “threats” to journalists strengthened the rhetorical force of the MFC's public statements and partly countered state's “deflection” strategies. Governments accused of abusing media freedom often attempt to deflect such criticism by highlighting structural threats to media freedom, such as journalistic professionalism and pay. As a spokesperson for one such government told us,

Why are media getting harassed and killed? It's because they've become pawns of local politicians because there is no minimum wage for media workers... If the Coalition says things about media being curtailed... we just take it. It's part of media freedom. They have a right to criticize our government. But we continue... protect[ing] local media to make sure they get their rightful income (Government representative 1).

However, the MFC's focus on physical and legal threats foreclosed recognition of wider determinants of media

freedom such as concentrations of ownership and collapses in advertising revenue. For journalists in countries targeted by the MFC, this narrow view severely limited the range of media freedom issues and actors that might successfully draw international attention. Given this, various actors repeatedly called on the MFC to broaden, enlarge or widen its remit to focus, not only on journalist safety and specific legal threats, but on “economic and political pressures.” For example, the UK Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into Media Freedom argued that the FCO had not, “addressed how good laws, [and] good training, will still be wasted if journalists cannot finance their operations” (2019, p. 23).

Finally, the MFC's narrow discourse on media freedom implied that media freedom could be successfully “defended” by “speaking out” at the highest level, on specific cases. Indeed, for this reason, several officials described media freedom as a relatively “resource-light” foreign policy issue, because it required “more ministerial time than programme [delivery]” (Senior civil servant 10). This emphasis on a high-level diplomatic approach was one of the most heavily criticized features of the MFC. CSO representatives repeatedly called for the MFC to focus, not just on “good rhetoric,” but on achieving “concrete results,” “tangible action,” and “real impact... on the ground.” For example, [Internews's \(2019\)](#) submission to the UK Select Committee inquiry “highlighted the need for the broadest possible understanding of the threats to media freedom,” arguing that,

Whilst the most egregious affronts to media freedom rightly draw the most international attention, they are a smaller component in a landscape of threats affecting tens of thousands of journalists globally... Well-resourced programming in this area will be more likely to achieve lasting impact than advocacy and diplomacy alone.

In summary, while the MFC's discourse may have helped strengthen its stigmatization strategy—largely by producing a subject-position which offered social recognition to new members—it also inadvertently legitimized a narrow, reactive and “resource-light” approach to supporting media freedom, focused almost exclusively on “other” countries.

What shaped the MFC's discourse on media freedom?

Our interviews and observations revealed multiple influences—at macro, meso, and micro levels—which shaped the MFC's media freedom discourse. Key among these were: the external norm environment; existing approaches to journalism safety; the internal dynamics of the MFC; and the personal and political values of its founder. This section explains how these factors influenced the MFC's approach to media freedom, showing that there was no obvious hierarchy between them but rather, a complex interaction. This also illustrates that neither a political economy approach nor a focus on norm entrepreneurship alone, could explain the data.

External norm environment: declining democracy and rising authoritarianism

When the MFC was established, there was a widespread perception amongst its members that both democracy and the rules-based international system were in global decline and that authoritarianism was on the rise. This “external norm

environment” (Krook and True 2012) played an important role shaping the MFC’s discourse. For example, in her address to the inaugural, Global Media Freedom conference in London, Canada’s Foreign Secretary, Chrystia Freeland (2019) argued that “the motivating idea for us to convene everyone here” was to begin to address the situation in which “liberal democracy and the rules-based international order are under greater threat than at any time since the Second World War.” Similarly, a representative from another MFC state told us,

Since we don’t have a consensus on democracy and rule of law at the UN - because it is being very actively undermined by Russia, China, the US, India, Brazil and others - these [coalitions] are where democracies go to nurse their wounds and try and plot their comeback. That is part of the picture where the MFC fits in (Senior civil servant 8).

Media freedom was relevant to this broader discourse about declining democracy and rising authoritarianism in two ways. First, declining levels of media freedom were repeatedly described as symptomatic of the wider decline in democracy and directly caused by rising authoritarianism. As Freeland (2019) went on to say in her speech, “there is no part of our liberal democratic garden that is more threatened. . . than the free press. . . We need to fight back.” Second, supporting media freedom was widely understood to help challenge authoritarianism and reverse the decline in democracy and the rules-based international order. For example, a representative of one MFC member state described journalists as “the tip of the spear right now of the effort to defend against democratic backsliding, the erosion of human rights norms and international law” (Senior civil servant 7). Similarly, multiple UK civil servants described this as central to Hunt’s view of media freedom. One told us that,

With the rise of China. . . with Russia posing some threats. . . seeing that the rules-based international system was increasingly under threat, Jeremy [Hunt] was saying “We need to find a way to shore that up. . . [and] the issue that really underpins all of our objectives is the ability to speak truth to power” (Civil servant 2).

This view of media freedom, and its relationship to democracy and authoritarianism, helps to explain several aspects of the MFC’s discourse. By describing media freedom as unambiguously “vital” to democracy, MFC statements supporting media freedom simultaneously reaffirm the importance of democracy. Put simply, the MFC’s “defence” of journalists becomes synonymous with a defence of democracy. Similarly, by repeatedly characterizing restrictions on the media as “attacks on human rights” (Global Pledge 2019), states that restrict media freedom were implicitly labelled, not just transgressors of the norm of media freedom, but threats to the international order. An anti-authoritarian stance was further supported by the MFC’s state-centric discourse, which enabled it to associate abuses of media freedom with authoritarian states, without always needing to explicitly name specific countries. In these ways, the MFC’s discourse supported, not only the norm of media freedom, but a much broader agenda of re-affirming democracy and the rules-based international order. However, such geo-political factors—which are foregrounded within a political economy approach—were

certainly not the only influence on the MFC’s discourse. As we explain below, the MFC’s focus on democracy and states were also informed by social dynamics and its founders’ values.

Existing norms and institutions: the (declining) safety of journalists

When the MFC was established, international discourse on media freedom focused primarily on journalist safety. The most obvious demonstration of this was the UN Plan, which identified measures to “create a free and safe environment for journalists” (2012, p. 5). In addition, media freedom was widely understood to be in decline. The murder of Jamal Khashoggi in October 2018 was cited by numerous respondents as an important illustration of both the dominant threats to media freedom and as evidence of the extent to which the strength of this international norm was threatened. Hunt told us it demonstrated that, “states were making calculations that the cost of knocking off a journalist was bearable” and described this as “a fundamental change.”

This existing discourse directly influenced the MFC’s language. When drafting MFC documents, there was a tendency, as one official explained, to “go back to language that people have already signed up to. . . in UN resolutions and statements” (Civil servant 6). The Global Pledge, for instance, was described as “written based on pre-existing language, adapted slightly for our purposes” (Civil servant 8). Given this, it is unsurprising that the MFC repeatedly refers to journalist safety; an issue which already had international consensus.

However, the MFC was also under pressure from states and CSOs to do more than just reinforce existing international norms. According to numerous interviewees, there was a widespread concern amongst states already “heavily involved in other media landscape initiatives” that the MFC would “duplicate” or “take the attention from other initiatives that have been more longstanding” (Senior civil servant 2). One official told us it was, “really, really quite hard to. . . grow the coalition” early on because many likeminded states “weren’t sympathetic to a new boy on the block coming in and telling them what to do” (Civil servant 2), especially during difficult Brexit negotiations. As a result, there was a strong imperative to ensure the MFC would “add value” to “existing initiatives,” rather than “replace” them (Civil servant 6). This imperative to “add value” helps explain why the MFC’s discourse focused on legal constraints to media freedom, as well as journalist safety, and why the two were often mentioned separately. This helped position the MFC as supporting but also extending existing work. Indeed, one official told us they tried to “add a little bit to. . . language which has previously been agreed. . . to try and encourage movement on it” (Civil servant 6).

This pressure to “add value” also helps explain the MFC’s focus on tackling impunity for crimes against journalists, and the associated emphasis on negative freedom. Various actors were critical of the UN Plan for promoting journalist safety “in theory” but not in practice. In particular, the UN Plan and other existing multi-lateral initiatives were criticized for not regularly raising specific cases of attacks against journalists as part of efforts to combat impunity for such crimes. For example, in its submission to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee inquiry into media freedom, IFEX (2019) argued that “the opportunity to bring cases forward. . . [within] UN bodies. . . doesn’t have as much teeth or weight as an actual

government coming out and saying something,” and that, “having states engaged on specific cases in such a concrete way is not something that you are seeing in other spaces” (ibid.). A key reason for the lack of action within the existing multilateral system was that such statements were likely be challenged or blocked by other member states. For example, the FCO (2019, p. 9) described how, “member States such as the Russian Federation and Turkey have sought the dismantling of the Council of Europe (CoE) Platform [to promote the protection of journalism].”

In this context, the MFC was intentionally designed to “add value” to existing international initiatives, such as the UN Plan, by enabling a coalition of likeminded states to “speak out and take action together” (Global Pledge 2019), at the highest political level, to tackle the climate of impunity on attacks against journalists. As Amal Clooney told us,

If... the international treaties that protect free speech... worked properly through the UN or other mechanisms, you wouldn't need a smaller coalition of countries to try and push the issue. But I am seeing, increasingly, that this is what you have to do... Move forward on one issue if you can, and a smaller number of countries at a time, until, hopefully, we get a more robust global system in place.

Similarly, a senior representative of a UN agency explained that, unlike the UN Plan, “the MFC has huge potential to up-scale work on egregious cases... [by] raising the cost of not enabling media freedom” (Multilateral representative 1).

In summary, existing international norms and institutions relevant to media freedom, and pressure from states and CSOs to “add value” to them, helped shape the MFC's focus on physical and legal constraints and tackling the issue of impunity for crimes against journalists. But, as we show in the following section, these aspects of the MFC's discourse were also shaped by its pursuit of sustainability, legitimacy, and consensus.

The MFC's internal dynamics: seeking consensus

The MFC's discourse on media freedom was also heavily shaped by interactions between its members. As part of Hunt's ambition to ensure the sustainability of the MFC, he invited Canada to serve as co-chair and to co-convene the first conference. These two states had a common interest in being seen to be leading an intergovernmental coalition on media freedom at a time when, as Hunt told us, “the [Trump] administration seems less interested in the championing of Western liberal values... compared to previous US administrations.” Furthermore, although Hunt claimed that “there wasn't any strategic Brexit link,” he did admit that the UK's imminent withdrawal from the European Union meant the MFC provided the UK with an opportunity to “champion an issue... that is consistent with our beliefs and values” as part of “our soft power.” As co-chairs, the UK and Canada had significant influence over the MFC's remit and membership and were primarily responsible for drafting its public statements and documents.

The UK's original preference was, as one interviewee described, for “as many countries to sign the pledge as possible because that was a way to hold them to account... to that set of standards” (Civil servant 7). For this reason, they invited almost “every single country” (Civil servant 7) to the first Global Conference to encourage them to sign the Pledge and join the MFC. However, there were also concerns that this

approach might “ruin the credibility of our coalition,” and that some countries might “come to the conference as a way of whitewashing their shortcomings” (Civil servant 5). Canada's preference was to use the pledge as “a carrot of entry to incentivise change” (Senior civil servant 5). After an intervention by Canada's Foreign Secretary, shortly before the London conference, it was ultimately agreed that the co-chairs would, “set the bar to entry to the MFC quite high” (FCO 2019, p. 3). As a result, according to one observer, “at the event itself, there were a few countries that wanted to join; to sign the pledge, and were told, ‘No, sorry’” (Senior civil servant 1). This decision reinforced the MFC's focus on stigmatizing nonmember states, rather than holding existing member states accountable for their commitments.

But despite seeking to limit entry to the MFC, there was also an imperative to recruit a geographically and culturally diverse membership. All major stakeholders agreed that it was important the MFC was not “just a white, Northern, Western hemisphere sort of thing” (Senior civil servant 2). Such diversity was considered important primarily for avoiding the criticism that the MFC was supporting a culturally specific idea, linked to the interests of its members, rather than a universal value. As a representative of one MFC member state explained,

When you go to many of the established multilateral fora... the detractors will always try and cast human rights as Western-driven, rather than universal... I think the MFC... is right to be inclusive... It allows us to get away from this Cold War idea of a liberal World Order where the West gives the norms and everybody else needs to accept them (Senior civil servant 8).

For this reason, some countries without strong reputations for media freedom, but which had recently made a commitment to change—such as Sudan—were allowed to join the MFC.

However, having a relatively diverse membership made it more difficult to reach agreement over the wording of its statements: and as an intergovernmental coalition seeking to strengthen an international norm, the MFC could not exist without a degree of consensus (Brysk 2009). Therefore, when drafting such statements, officials tended to “steer away from... [difficult] questions” (Civil servant 6). This helps to explain why the MFC's discourse was so consistent and why it often emphasized journalist safety because, as one interviewee explained, it is easier for states to agree on cases that are “life threatening” (CSO representative 22). In contrast, references to less widely accepted aspects of media freedom, such as the value of a “free marketplace of ideas,” would likely not have received consensus and would have undermined the idea that media freedom is a universal, rather than culturally specific value.

In summary, although the UK and Canada had a relatively strong influence over the MFC's composition and agenda, the pursuit of sustainability, legitimacy, and consensus required co-operation with other states, which ultimately reinforced the MFC's focus on negative freedom and external accountability, in relation to journalist safety.

Jeremy Hunt and the UK FCO: “Raising the cost” of imprisoning journalists

Conventional sociological studies of norm diffusion often highlight the key role played by “norm entrepreneurs.”

Certainly, we found evidence to show that the UK Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt did have a significant influence over the MFC's focus. However, our evidence also shows that his influence was tempered—not only by the macro and meso-level causal factors discussed above—but also by the bureaucratic politics within the FCO.

According to multiple sources, the initial idea for the MFC originated from Hunt. From the beginning, he intended the MFC to focus primarily on advocating for specific cases of journalist imprisonment. He told us that,

I wanted us to have a list of journalists that were locked up, that countries in the coalition would agree we would all mention. So, for example, if you go to Turkey, whether it is Japan, the UK or Canada, we would always bring up the issue of their locked-up journalists so that they feel the pressure. That was what I wanted to happen.

Hunt told us that the decision to establish the MFC, and pursue a high-level diplomatic approach, was heavily influenced by his recent involvement in advocating for “the release of the Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo” in Myanmar and how “proud” he was to have helped to “getting them out.” A senior FCO official also told us that, “we have really embedded that example into... what the MFC should do, and, obviously, doing so in good company is often going to be much more effective” (Senior civil servant 2). Indeed, another interviewee claimed that “Jeremy was very struck that his own personal lobbying of Aung San Suu Kyi did not lead to the immediate result that we would have thought” (Senior civil servant 9) and that this helped explain why the MFC was designed to involve states acting collectively.

Hunt's original ambition for the MFC also reflected his understanding of international relations. His primary objective for the MFC was to strengthen the norm of media freedom. Hunt told us that he hoped media freedom would, “become part of the definition of what it is to be a developed country. Not just some kind of Western value, but something that happens for everyone.” Furthermore, Hunt saw the MFC as a particularly effective way of strengthening this norm because it could, “change political calculations and increase the costs to those who abuse media freedom” by “imposing a diplomatic price.” Hunt's adoption of a stigmatizing approach to international advocacy is clearly illustrated in the following interview extract:

Hunt: Every country cares about its reputation, so they really don't want to have every meeting that their president or prime minister has with people from other countries to be taken up by people asking these awkward questions... That, for me, was the purpose of this campaign: to “raise the price” so that it was too high.

Interviewer: So, is that your theory of change? Is that something we could attribute to your understanding of how international relations works and what the function and design of the campaign should be?

Hunt: Yes. That is exactly right. That is exactly how I saw it.

Hunt's favoring of a stigmatizing approach helps to explain the MFC's accountability discourse because the idea of

“holding to account... those who harm journalists” (Terms of Reference 2020) helps construct a rationale for taking action against other states. It also further explains the MFC's focus on negative freedom because stigmatization requires certain behaviors to be labelled as unacceptable (Adler-Nissen 2014), and interference with the activities of journalists, or negative freedom, provides a clear means of identifying deviant acts. Indeed, Hunt's own public and private discourse on media freedom repeatedly emphasized both negative freedom and journalism's watchdog function, as evidenced in this interview extract:

Hunt: There's an economic risk to media freedom. I came across that issue. But, overall... I think, basically, everyone knew that we are talking about countries where journalists are not free to write copy that criticises the government of the day. That is what we are trying to protect, which is, for me, not just an important democratic principle, but the foundation of all our progress as human beings. Once we have started to allow challenge to ideas, that's when we really took off.

Interviewer: So, you are more interested in the problems created by states for journalists rather than problems created by economic situations?

Hunt: Yes. I am not saying that the other ones aren't problems, but this is my focus.

The reference to journalists “criticis[ing] the government of the day” illustrates Hunt's concern for a watchdog function, while the references to “protecting” journalists from “problems created by states” highlights his focus on negative freedom. Hunt's lack of emphasis on economic issues in this extract, also mirrors the MFC's discourse. However, unlike the MFC, Hunt repeatedly emphasized the idea of a “free marketplace of ideas.” This is evident in the reference above to journalists “allow[ing] challenge to ideas” and in his tendency to quote “the great thinker John Stuart Mill” in public statements.

But while Hunt may have initially proposed the idea of the MFC, he told us that he let senior civil servants “work out the details of how we do it.” Therefore, the bureaucratic politics within the FCO also had a strong influence on the original design and discourse of the MFC. In particular, the financial and organizational constraints at the FCO reinforced the MFC's focus on diplomatic lobbying on cases of journalist imprisonment, rather than economic issues. Several FCO officials told us they were “very careful” to ensure their work “didn't duplicate... [or] detract from the work that the British Council... [and] the Department for International Development (DFID) were doing on things like media sustainability” (Civil servant 8). As a result, when designing the MFC, the FCO “focussed on... building political will; the work to alert governments to their responsibilities” (Senior civil servant 2) rather than supporting “the wider ecosystem” (Senior civil servant 2) of media sustainability. As another official put it, although people said, “You need to keep the lights on,” we said, “Well, that's not for us. We don't do that” (Civil servant 9). This distinction between the FCO's focus on diplomatic efforts to protect journalists and DFID's focus on support for the wider enabling environment was reinforced by a perception within the FCO that the former required much greater financial resources. As one FCO Official

told us, “media sustainability is more DFID, because it [costs] lots of money. . . [Whereas], at the FCO, we only have access to very small pots of money here and there. So, mostly, we focus on the political side” (Civil servant 2).

In summary, Hunt’s personal experiences and perceptions, combined with the bureaucratic politics within the FCO, contributed to—but did not determine—the MFC’s accountability discourse, focus on negative freedom, and lack of focus on economic issues.

Conclusion

This study has examined how media freedom was defined within the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) during its first two years (2019–2021), what shaped this discourse, and what its implications were—through the lens of critical norm research. We have three key findings.

First, regarding the question of how the MFC defined “media freedom” (RQ1), we found that it consistently focused on the state, physical, and legal threats, journalism’s watchdog function, and negative freedom. Given this, it could be characterized as adopting a hegemonic, liberal perspective, broadly aligned with the dominant ideology of its co-chairs: the UK and Canada. However, it would be wrong to conclude from this that the MFC, therefore, serves primarily as a mechanism of media imperialism, helping to create the conditions for Western domination of global media markets. Our analysis of the MFC’s discourse reveals that other key aspects of a liberal perspective, such as an emphasis on a “marketplace of ideas” and private ownership, are absent. We also show that the partial adoption of a liberal perspective derived largely from the social dynamics within the Coalition, rather than via the co-chairs’ influence. Given this, our analysis leads us to caution against one-dimensional readings of international discourses on media freedom, which often characterize political-economy analyses.

This analysis also helps to illustrate one of the central features of critical norm research: that social norms, such as media freedom, have no fixed, universal definition. Future research may benefit, therefore, from treating media freedom as a “floating signifier” (Laclau 2005) and interrogating the production and political implications of its ambiguity (Krook and True 2012), rather than seeking to provide “greater conceptual and analytical clarity” (Berger 2010, p. 561) or assuming that norms require “clear definition” (Lamer 2018, p. 88) to be influential.

Second, regarding the implications of the MFC’s discourse (RQ2), we argued that it de-emphasized internal accountability, state support, structural determinants of media freedom, and the significance of nonstate actors and local state authorities, with implications for resource allocation and public policy. For example, Carey and Gohdes (2021, p. 25) argue that local journalists are especially vulnerable to attacks instigated by powerful local authorities precisely because they, “tend to draw little attention from national or international audiences.” However, we also argued that this discourse was necessary for establishing strategically valuable identities for member states, which led to so many states joining, and for supporting the MFC’s stigmatizing strategy. If the MFC had highlighted cases of attacks on journalists by local, rather than national authorities, for example, this may have undermined its efforts to strengthen media freedom as an

international norm, which requires acceptance by national governments.

This illustrates another important point—that understandings of media freedom and efforts to promote it can never be politically neutral. All actions and meanings support some interests over others. Recognizing this and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about what is right, “good” or universally appropriate is an important step towards a more reflexive, effective, and ethical practice. For CSOs, it is important to reflect on their own normative biases and the wider implications of their discourses and approaches to supporting media freedom. Decisions over which media workers to support, to achieve what purpose(s), in response to which “threats” and/or societal needs, inevitably legitimize some interests and ideological world views at the expense of others. Similarly, research into media freedom, journalist safety, or any other international norm, must accept that it too is inevitably involved in normalizing some power structures over others. In our case, by adopting a discursive perspective, we have inadvertently undermined the MFC’s stigmatizing strategy, which relies on the idea that “media freedom” is a fixed and universal norm. Moreover, by focusing on the actions and discourses of MFC member states, we have largely neglected the perspectives of journalists and others in countries targeted by the MFC, which would have allowed us to examine how the MFC’s actions support or undermine alternative, localized approaches to media freedom.

Finally, in addressing the question —“what shaped the MFC’s discourse on media freedom”? (RQ3)—our analysis demonstrates that although the MFC was initially proposed by Hunt, and its discourse does partly reflect his own, it would be wrong to characterize this simply as a case of successful “norm entrepreneurship”. We show that Hunt’s agency was itself structured by his own past experiences of international diplomacy and constrained by bureaucratic politics, existing international norms, Freeland’s influence, pressure from CSOs and social dynamics that required cooperation with other states. Similarly, other states joined the MFC, not because they were persuaded by the UK of the virtuousness of the issue, as conventional, constructivist research often implies. Rather, they joined because its discourse offered them an opportunity to adopt an advantageous identity as “democracy defenders,” because its actions filled an important gap in existing initiatives and because it contributed to a wider geo-political agenda of challenging authoritarianism. In short, The MFC’s stigmatizing approach and corresponding discourse was the result of an interplay of power structures and actor’s agency, within a social system—just as critical norm research suggests (Epstein 2008).

The MFC’s unique membership, approach, and internal dynamics mean that the interplay of power structures and actors’ agency observed here is likely to operate differently within other intergovernmental initiatives. Nevertheless, we can reasonably suppose that an external norm environment characterized by declining democracy and rising authoritarianism may affect other intergovernmental media freedom initiatives in similar ways. The emphasis on supporting democracy and the rules-based international order within the U.S.-led Summit for Democracy, for example, is also likely to reinforce its focus on a state-centric, hierarchical, and liberal approach to media freedom. We can also hypothesize that the social dynamics operating within the MFC are likely to be significant in shaping support for other media freedom

initiatives. This may mean the U.S. government's financial support for the International Fund for Public Interest Media incentivizes other countries to make contributions, for example. Finally, given that the imperative to establish a niche within an already crowded norm environment heavily shaped the MFC's focus on media freedom, such niche-seeking is likely to influence the focus of other similar initiatives. It may, for example, help to explain the UK government's choice of other recent international campaigns, such as supporting girls' education and preventing sexual violence in conflict.

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Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly to protect the privacy of individuals that participated in the study.

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