**Response of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to the call for inputs from the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression to inform her report on opportunities, challenges and threats to media in the digital age**

The United Kingdom (UK) recognises the vital importance of a free, independent, plural and diverse media and we are committed to protecting it in the face of increasing threats. The UK has a long history of a vibrant and independent media, underpinning the values of our democracy. The UK has long supported media freedoms, both at home and in supporting the development of a strong and independent media in countries overseas.

The UK launched a global campaign on Media Freedom on 1 November 2018, demonstrating our commitment to shine a global spotlight on media freedom and increase the cost to those abusing media freedom and persecuting journalists.

* 1. **What are the key trends, threats or challenges to the freedom, independence, pluralism and diversity of media and the safety of journalists in your country, region, or globally in your view?**
  2. **To what extent have these trends, threats and challenges emerged, or have been aggravated, because of the policies and practices of digital and social media platforms?**
  3. **Please highlight the gender dimensions of the trends and their consequences for the equality and safety of women journalists as well as media freedom.**

Media and journalists are under threat across the world. The UK sees two sets of challenges and threats facing free and independent media, which are often found in combination. Firstly, journalists and media workers face attempts to silence them or to persuade them to censor themselves, in most extreme cases through murder, but also through physical violence, intimidation, harassment, arbitrary detention, restrictive laws, punitive legal measures, and censorship. Women journalists face particular, additional risks in this regard. Secondly, media face severe financial pressures. As news has migrated online, advertising revenues have been falling dramatically. Newspaper advertising spending worldwide declined from some 110 billion U.S. dollars in 2007 to 29.5 billion dollars in 2021.[[1]](#footnote-1) This has led to several media outlets, including especially local news outlets, being forced to close. In many countries, financial pressures on media are combined with political or criminal attacks on journalists and media workers.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing threats to free and independent media around the world, including political and financial threats. A 2020 survey by the International Federation of Journalists found that three in four journalists faced official restrictions, obstruction or intimidation in reporting on Covid-19. In the same survey, two-thirds of staff and freelance journalists reported suffering pay cuts, lost revenue, job losses, cancelled commissions or worsening working conditions.[[2]](#footnote-2) The UK is concerned at attempts to use the pandemic to restrict press freedom, silence debate, abuse journalists, or spread misinformation. We are also deeply concerned to see more publications contracting and closing, and journalists being made redundant due to the pandemic.

Women journalists face particular, additional threats. According to the UNESCO-ICFJ survey on online violence against women journalists, 73% of women respondents said they had experienced online violence, with 20% reporting they had been attacked or abused offline in connection with online violence they had experienced.

In addition, investigating corruption and serious and organised crime can put investigative journalists at serious risk of harm. Given the media can play a vital role in exposing corruption and initiating legal and political action against it, those who are seen to have played a role in exposing this can be risking their safety. Countries with the lowest protection for press and NGOs tend to have the worst rates of corruption.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Regarding the trends and challenges facing media in the UK, the independent Cairncross Review examined the overall state of the news media market; the threats to the financial sustainability of publishers; the impact of search engines and social media platforms; and the role of digital advertising. The Review found that, as society is increasingly moving online, news publishers are facing significant challenges in transitioning to sustainable digital business models. The government supports the majority of the recommendations made in the Cairncross Review and has been taking them forward through a range of fiscal and regulatory interventions.

In 2021, DCMS and the Home Office carried out a Call for Evidence to gather evidence on the nature and volume of threats, abuse, and violence that journalists face in the course of their work operating in the UK. The research provided insight into a number of themes regarding the safety of journalists, including the incidents experienced, their impact, and how these are reported. Key findings included:

* A very high proportion of respondents had experienced incidents, particularly ‘abuse’, ‘intimidation’ and ‘threats of violence’, taking place both online and offline at varying frequency.
* Responses confirmed the significant impact this has on journalists and their behaviour both professionally and personally. This included influence on their journalistic output.
* Over 1 in 3 female respondents indicated that they do not feel safe operating as a journalist in the UK.
* The majority of respondents did not report all incidents to platforms, police and employers, due in part to poor confidence they would be progressed or taken seriously.
* Responses implied low confidence in current arrangements of police and platforms to deal with incidents, with employers seen more ambivalently.

The UK National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists sets out how UK journalists will be protected from threats of violence or intimidation; see response to question 4.

1. **What legislative, administrative, policy, regulatory or other measures have Governments taken to promote press/media freedom, including media independence, pluralism, viability and ownership issues? What has been the impact of these measures? What changes or additional measures would you recommend?**

Our answer to this question focuses on domestic action within the UK. International action is reported later.

Newspapers in the UK have benefited from a number of recent interventions, including the extension of business rates relief for local newspaper office space in England; the £2 million Future News Fund; and the zero-rating of VAT on e-newspapers. During the pandemic, many newspapers have also benefited from a unique and unprecedented government advertising partnership, designed to deliver important messages to UK citizens.

Looking ahead, the government set out its proposals for a new pro-competition regime for digital markets in a public consultation in July 2021. As part of the plans, we will introduce a new statutory code of conduct to govern the relationships between powerful online platforms and the businesses which depend on them. The code will be a significant intervention in the government’s effort to support the sustainability of the news publishing industry, helping to rebalance the relationship between news publishers and the online platforms on which they increasingly rely. We will continue to consider all possible options in the interests of promoting and sustaining news journalism.

Legislative protection for journalism published via social media: in May the UK published draft Online Safety Bill legislation. The Bill will usher in a new age of accountability for tech companies. Tech companies are going to be accountable to an independent regulator to keep their users, particularly children, safe. At the same time, the Bill will defend freedom of expression and the invaluable role of a free press:

* News publishers’ own content on their own sites is not in scope, and user comments on news publishers’ own content will also be exempt.
* News publishers’ content will be exempted from platforms’ new online safety duties.

Legislation will also impose a duty on the biggest tech companies to safeguard all journalistic content shared on their platform (including news publishers’ journalistic content).

1. **What measures are Governments taking to support public service media? What has been the impact of such measures? What changes or additional measures would you recommend?**

The UK Government supports public interest media across the world. The UK has provided over £400 million in Official Development Assistance (ODA) to media and free flow of information in the past 5 years. We are consistently in the top 5 aid donors to the media sector globally. Specifically, the UK supports the Protecting Independent Media for Effective Development (PRIMED) programme which supports public interest media in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone. The programme is innovative in bringing together several leading media development organisations in a consortium led by BBC Media Action. Working in depth with media organisations in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Sierra Leone, PRIMED is supporting these organisations to survive and thrive in difficult economic times. It is also working with editors, regulators and civil society organisations to develop a better environment for media in these three countries, and is developing and publishing learning around the most effective ways for external donors to support media organisations.

In addition to PRIMED, the FCDO continues to support other major programmes supporting freedom of expression and media development. The Protecting Rights, Openness and Transparency - Enhancing Civic Transformation programme (PROTECT), is supporting media organisations to improve their sustainability in Kenya, and is providing emergency support to journalists under threat in Myanmar. The Aswat Horra (Free Voices) programme is building the capacity of 11 civil society organisations to campaign more effectively for freedom of expression in Lebanon and Libya.

The FCDO is also supporting research towards an early warning system designed to detect and predict the threat of violence and harassment against women journalists (online and offline). This system will use online attack indicators and other metrics derived from five new ‘big data’ case studies focused on women in India, Lebanon, Malta, Mexico and South Africa.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Official Development Assistance to the media sector is a small part of total ODA and there is relatively limited research and evidence in this area. The UK believes more could be done to share lessons about effective ways to support public interest media across the world, and in that regard we have helped to establish a Working Group on Media Development at the Media Freedom Coalition (see answer 4 below for more on the Media Freedom Coalition).

In addition to the free and diverse print media sector referred to above, the UK benefits from a well-established system of public service broadcasting across both radio and television. This sector is supported by c.£3.7 billion per annum of public funding and supports a number of outcomes, including the provision of comprehensive and authoritative domestic and international news and current affairs content. In addition the FCDO also supports the BBC World Service with a World 2020 Grant in Aid funding of c.£94m per year, which funds 12 additional foreign language services, disinformation and digital enhancements. The UK Government is currently undertaking a review of the UK’s system of public service broadcasting to ensure that it remains relevant and can continue to meet the needs of audiences in the future.

1. **What measures have a) Governments b) social media companies c) media companies taken to promote the safety of journalists? What has been the impact of these measures? What more can/should be done and by whom? Please also mention any specific laws or measures to address online violence, threats and harassment and what result they have produced.**

The UK Government launched the Media Freedom Campaign in November 2018 to shine a global spotlight on media freedom and increase the cost to those abusing media freedom and persecuting journalists.

**Media Freedom Coalition**: The Media Freedom Coalition was formed in July 2019 at the London Global Conference for Media Freedom and is a partnership of countries working together to advocate for media freedom and safety of journalists and hold to account those who harm journalists for doing their job. The Coalition’s raison d’être is to defend media freedom where it is under threat. The Media Freedom Coalition has expanded the membership to 50 countries who pledged to improve media freedom and the safety of journalists at home and abroad. It has issued 20 statements on cases of concern to date. The Media Freedom Coalition also uses its diplomatic missions to co-ordinate locally to increase support to and engagement with journalists and independent media under threat.

**High Level Legal Panel**: At the request of the Governments of the UK and Canada, Amal Clooney and Lord Neuberger, former President of the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom, convened an independent [High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.ibanet.org%2FIBAHRISecretariat.aspx&data=04%7C01%7Cj-williams%40dfid.gov.uk%7Ccd46b038fa584bec4ae108d9d5eb0fa1%7Ccdf709af1a184c74bd936d14a64d73b3%7C0%7C0%7C637776027820833922%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=0EgwxTe%2BTH2Gswx9TMfvtIgrMw2tY7Q2cyYjLVrcsCk%3D&reserved=0).  The Panel helps the campaign produce international action on media freedom by providing specialist advice and recommendations for legal and other mechanisms to protect and encourage free media.

The Panel issued its first enforcement report in February 2020 on the use of sanctions to protect journalists and has issued three further reports in November, including on international investigatory mechanisms and transparency. Recommendations in the reports are intended to help governments develop better legislation and policies concerning media freedom. We are working closely with the Panel to identify countries for which the recommendations would be especially beneficial and support implementation of recommendations, as well as promoting their reports through our network.

**Global Media Defence Fund**: [The Global Media Defence Fund](https://eur02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fen.unesco.org%2Fglobal-media-defence-fund&data=04%7C01%7Cj-williams%40dfid.gov.uk%7Ccd46b038fa584bec4ae108d9d5eb0fa1%7Ccdf709af1a184c74bd936d14a64d73b3%7C0%7C0%7C637776027820833922%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000&sdata=qW0AuRUGN3GBDDUm5GKuHQ0hJMVyRXtNv7or2xAsxg8%3D&reserved=0) (GMDF) was developed within the framework of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom and under the umbrella of the UN Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity. It launched during the first Global Conference on Media Freedom (London, July 2019), at the initiative of the UK and Canada.

Administered by UNESCO, the Fund supports not-for-profit organisations working on the ground at the local, regional, and international level in the undertaking or upscaling of projects that bolster journalists’ legal protection and/or enhance media freedom through investigative journalism or strategic litigation.

The UK has donated £3m over five years and encourages contributions from other countries and private companies. More than 1700 journalists have benefitted from 41 projects supported by the GMDF. Recognising the special risks faced by women journalists, gender equality has been mainstreamed among all proposals.

**G7**: The UK championed media freedom through our G7 Presidency in 2021. We secured strong new commitments through the Foreign and Development Ministers Communique, including commitments to support the Global Media Defence Fund, to coordinate action through diplomatic networks to address violations of media freedom, and to work together to address the financial crisis facing media across the world.

**Domestic Action:** The UK is committed to the safety of journalists and has set up a National Committee for the safety of journalists, and published a National Action Plan for the safety of journalists in March 2021.

The National Committee for the Safety of Journalists brings together representatives from government, journalism, policing, prosecution services and civil society to work in collaboration to make sure that journalists in the UK are able to operate free from threats and violence. This is part of our broader commitment to ensuring the future sustainability of high-quality, public interest news.

The National Action Plan sets out how UK journalists will be protected from threats of violence or intimidation. The Plan sets out concrete initiatives that will provide genuine support to journalists facing safety challenges. Social media platforms have committed as part of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists to respond promptly to threats against journalist safety. Our Online Safety Bill will further tackle the issue of online abuse.

1. **What do you believe has been the impact of digital and social platforms on press/media freedom, independence, viability and safety of journalists? What specific recommendations would you make to a) Governments and b) the companies to address or mitigate the detrimental impact ?**

The Cairncross Review examined the overall state of the news media market; the threats to the financial sustainability of publishers; the impact of search engines and social media platforms; and the role of digital advertising. The Review concluded that online platforms (particularly Google and Facebook) are able to impose unfair terms on publishers, which limits publishers’ ability to monetise their content and threatens the sustainability of the press.

The Review made a number of recommendations for government, regulators and industry to address this and help future-proof the sector. The government supports the majority of the recommendations made in the Cairncross Review and has been taking them forward through a range of fiscal and regulatory interventions.

The central recommendation from Cairncross was for new government regulation of digital markets, specifically designed to rebalance the relationship between key platforms and the news publishers that rely on them. As part of the plans for our new Pro-Competition Regime, we will introduce a new statutory code of conduct that will support the sustainability of the news publishing industry and help to rebalance the relationship between publishers and online platforms. The code will be a significant intervention in the government’s effort to support the sustainability of the news publishing industry.

1. **Do you see any major gaps in the international human rights legal framework? Are there any specific recommendations that you would suggest to address such gaps or to improve implementation of existing standards?**

The UK does not see any major gaps in the international human rights legal framework around freedom of opinion and expression. We do however see major gaps in states’ compliance with this framework. We believe that prolonged arguments over the framework itself serve to distract from serious failures of implementation. In addition, the UK opposes efforts to impose undue restrictions on freedom of opinion and expression, for example in the name of addressing misinformation or fighting COVID-19.

1. **The Special Rapporteur would welcome examples of good practice by Governments, companies, the media sector, civil society and other stakeholders, and your recommendations on how best to address the challenges and threats to press/media freedom, independence, diversity, pluralism, and safety of journalists. Please share any relevant documents, reports, news or academic articles that you believe should be considered in the preparation of her report.**

The National Action Plan for the safety of Journalists was developed in collaboration with the National Committee, and a range of other stakeholders, and published in March 2021.

As part of the National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, the UK Government launched a Call for Evidence with the intention of building a better understanding of the volume and type of threats and abuse against journalists, as well as their impact, in order to develop a targeted approach to tackling the issue. Since then, the UK Government has published a report with the key findings.

Additionally, the UK Government also worked alongside the Media Lawyers’ Association in publishing guidance to help journalists understand the law in this area and help them recognise abuse that may be illegal.

The National Union for Journalists published its Safety Report in 2020 highlighting threats and safety issues for media workers in the UK.

The High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom has produced and published a series of four advisory reports that focus on improving international mechanisms to enforce international human rights norms. The recommendations from the four advisory reports request action from states, including state members of the Media Freedom Coalition, to promote and protect a vibrant free press and ensure the safety of journalists.

The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office publishes periodic updates on its work on media freedom to Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee.

1. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/273708/global-newspaper-advertising-expenditure/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/exposed-the-crisis-facing-journalism-in-the-face-of-covid-19.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.oecd.org/corruption/the-role-of-media-and-investigative-journalism-in-combating-corruption.htm> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.icfj.org/news/towards-early-warning-system-violence-against-women-journalists> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)