



INTERNATIONAL WEBINARS AND LIVE EVENTS

Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists in Times of Crisis

The webinar is organised by **Austria, Canada and Netherlands**
in partnership with the **RightOn initiative** and co-sponsored by members of
the **core groups on the resolutions on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists**

4 June 2020

Introductory Remarks:

Moderated by **H.E. Leslie E. Norton**, *Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Canada to the United Nations and the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva*

In times when public authorities must take significant decisions that affect public health, civil liberties and people's prosperity, the public's right to access information about such decisions is vital. Governments must, under international human rights law, protect the right to freedom of expression, including the right to seek, receive, and impart information of all kinds, regardless of frontiers. In times of crisis, the provision of reliable information in accessible formats to all, including by ensuring access to the internet, is crucial for governments' efforts to protect the public. Ensuring media pluralism and strengthening professional journalism plays an important role in countering harmful mis- and disinformation. In this context, more than ever, protecting journalists and media workers must include not only their physical but also their legal and economic safety. Attacks on journalists must be followed by effective investigations with a view of prosecuting and punishing those responsible. Canada supports next Global Conference for Media Freedom.

H.E. Robert Mueller – Ambassador, Head of the Austrian Delegation to the Conference on Disarmament

The current crisis can be seen as an opportunity to rethink political priorities, since one of the lessons learned is that access to information and free, independent, plural and diverse media is critical to sustainable crisis recovery and management. Austria with a core group runs this resolution on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists. Traditionally this discussion is held as a Side Event to the Human Rights September session. Austria is currently working on a new law on the Right to access to information.

Panellists:

H.E. Michelle Bachelet – UN High Commissioner for Human Rights:

Covid19 pandemic continues to challenge our societies, governments, and ourselves. While some countries start re-opening, others do not. Indeed while the virus does not discriminate, social and economic inequalities are exacerbated. Overall impact is clearly catastrophic. Freedom of expression, free, independent and pluralistic journalism is more important than ever. Access to information provides an opportunity to understand, participate and follow the guidelines, it fosters trust in institutions, and increases accountability and transparency. Freedom of expression is a crucial component of public health. Journalists are reportedly intimidated, denigrated, harassed and detained, media licences are withdrawn. Women journalists are under particular risk of intimidation. [International Press Institute](#) recorded 335 press freedom violations linked to COVID-19 coverage. Criticism is not a crime; independent journalism should be supported everywhere. It is thanks to journalists that we are able to see the human faces of this pandemic and the recovery. Infodemics of misinformation fuels hate speech against migrants, minorities, and LGBTIQ groups people. Journalists and media have important oversight role in fact checking and addressing false information. Access to accurate information is not only a right, it saves lives. Protection of right to access information is essential to cope and build back better. The Human Rights Council should work towards supporting the media and ending impunity against the journalists.



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Mr David Kaye – UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression:

Released a new report in April: [Disease pandemics and the freedom of opinion and expression](#) (A/HRC/44/49). The reporting has tried to focus on the robustness of the right to seek and receive the information and to highlight the narrowness of the ability of the states to restrict those rights. Governments have not been doing all they should to promote and protect freedom of expression and access to information during crisis. We have seen censorship of medical information, restrictions on media, doctors, journalists. There have been a number of situation where some doctors and media were unable to report – on the nature of the crisis and on the nature of the response. Restriction on journalists unable them to do their job in the field, since a lot of time they are not considered as essential workers. Disinformation – “the infodemic” – can be an extremely problematic aspect, since criminalisation of disinformation leads to the environment of self-censorship. Statistics should be an essential part in the time of pandemics. Reliable statistical data should be available to the public, so that scientists, policy makers and public could make informed choices about what is important for public health. Government restrictions harm public health and other rights. Social media plays an important role in the context of pandemic: it has a gate-keeping function related to the access to information around the world.

Ms Agnes Callamard – UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary, or arbitrary executions:

Over the last week we have been bombarded with images of profound disruption in our societies with protests against systematized racism in our institutions and societies. We should link this to COVID-19 zoom on the dysfunctions of our societies. Journalists as truth-tellers and fact-finders are stigmatized. Facts are under great attack, we need to find our epistemic authorities, who will be able to give the meaning to facts. Symbolic, emblematic investigations can carry the message very far (e.g. Jamal Khashoggi, Daphne Caruana Galizia). They can demonstrate that no one can go away with the killing of a journalist. They shine a light on political maze of political and societal corruption in local, national and international governance systems. We need to see regional organizations to put pressure on the governments, so that independent, authoritarian investigations can be carried out. It is important to support families and civil society when they are calling for independent investigations – and the UN has a role to play in it. Independent investigatory mechanism is urgently needed to investigate the killings of journalists and ed with the culture of impunity. Free access to information is the greatest source of protection we can have against the impact of disasters and pandemics.

Ms Fatou Jagne Senghore – Founder of Article 19, Senegal:

The crisis revealed the importance of access to information. At the beginning of this pandemic there was support for public policies but lack of information from governments particularly regarding most vulnerable has triggered mistrust and protests from vulnerable communities rejecting emergency measures. Public trust is essential, but it will only come when the decisions are just, fair, transparent, and taking into account the vulnerable groups. The current crisis can be an opportunity to build a new narrative of access to information, under the normative legislation that has already been there. Access to information is vital for fighting the pandemic but also for maintaining peace and ensuring sustainable development. Building public trust is essential, as well as access to reliable information, and ensuring that journalists are protected and supported, both financially and psychologically.

Mr Christophe Deloire – Secretary General and Executive Director of Reporters Without Borders:

We have two key strategies to address misinformation: 1. Exercising pressure 2. Defining better and stronger rules. We are in period where we have to mobilise democratic governance and raise the cost for those who violate rights. It is time for accountability. We should follow the logic of coalition, instead of the logic of competition. We should move forward to the right to reliable information, keeping in mind



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that access to information does not equal to access to manipulative content and rumours. [Forum on Information and Democracy](#) was founded by 11 independent organizations from different backgrounds and regions, and for new way of collaboration between the governments and civil society.

[Ms Barbara Trionfi – Executive Director at the International Press Institute:](#)

When States limit rights is exactly when the role of journalists scrutinising these restrictions is most vital. Many governments took advantage of the crisis to pass abusive anti-fake law news and limit journalist access. A number of journalists have been arrested for violating the lockdown. They experience problems of accessing the information from governments, difficulties in accessing the press-conferences (limited number of participants, selective media participation favouring governments' interests). 16 countries have passed new anti-fakes laws since February. Many of these restrictions are likely to remain in place when the restrictions to be lifted. Physical attacks against journalism have become more frequent. Economic crisis is affecting the media, especially, the independent media – which will have long-term consequences. The public funds should be made available to support the media, especially those who give voice to minorities and different actors of the society. Value of accurate pluralistic information is to be highlighted. We need to focus on how to value journalism more in our societies and not have heads of state constantly bash journalists. We need to dedicate more resources to give greater value to journalism rather than calling for greater censorship.

Concluding Remarks:

[H.E. Monique Van Daalen – Ambassador, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to the United Nations in Geneva:](#)

Access to accurate information and freedom of journalists are of vital importance. Safe environment is needed for the work of journalists, and it is governments' role to ensure this environment. There exist extreme risks for journalists, especially in times of crisis. Press freedom and safety of journalists is an important international issue. Netherlands supports the core group that intends to present a related resolution during the upcoming sessions of the Human Rights Council.