

Press Conference Transcript

January 27th, 2021

Is journalism another casualty of COVID 19?

**Ian Williams**, President, Foreign Press Association

**Professor Damian Radcliffe**, University of Oregon

**Will Church**, Head of Journalism & Media Programmes, Thomsons Reuters Foundation

**Ian Williams:** Well, hello, everybody. It's almost a year since the epidemic started and we've begun these webinars, so it's getting close to an anniversary and just to recapitulate the Foreign Press Association's exploits, our very first electronic zoom webinar, we had to substitute an in-person press conference by a writer from Bloomberg who had written a novel about the effect of SARS on New York and had researched police responses, government responses and we switched it to webinar and we haven't switched back since then. Amongst the other people we interviewed, Ruth Michaelson, from Cairo who was thrown out by the Egyptian government. And as mentioned in the report we're discussing today, we had reports from around the world, we had reports from the American Morticians Association on the impending crisis in the morgues, which was ahead of the curve. And it actually it actually came out. And it's a subject which it's morbid, but people have avoided it because it gave a real view of the death rate when governments were saying it wasn't that bad. You say it's not that bad and there's ambulances queuing up outside the morgues because there's nowhere for them to go. And the funeral homes are using rental trucks to store the overload. You know that things are bad there. And that's the type of beat reporting which we sort of lost truck of because you can't move around with the ease that we used to. So, we're here today to discuss the reports on COVID on their work and COVID from the Thomson Reuters Foundation. We've been having training sessions across the globe and much of the report, not all but it's based on a solid framework of 55 of their alumni, their trainees from the various countries around the world, and I hate to say there are very few bright spots in it. There are bright spots amongst the responses from the journalists and from proprietors but universally, as one of your interlocutors in the report said, governments never failed to seize advantage of an opportunity to repress the media. And that's what happened. And the big difficulty is trying to sort out the good stuff and the bad stuff, like when the government tells you don't need masks. Is it because you don't need masks or because they think the mask will be better off going to somewhere else? The deal, which was the first question I asked when the government here in the United States, said that ordinary people didn't need masks. It was because they didn't have enough for the hospitals, but they didn't say that. And once again, honesty is, you know, it's quite a good policy, fairly consistent. And so, we had lots of incidents like that. We had complete lying and obfuscation about casualties. And the interesting thing, reading these reports from the Third World, from Egypt, where our colleague Ruth was thrown out because she reported on that, she actually reported their own statistics on the casualty rate, places like the Philippines, where people get locked up for revealing it, or places where people can actually get killed for going and trying to find these things out. So, this is an extra casualty. And I think one of the points that was a bit upsetting there was you said in the report at the time last November, four hundred and sixty two of our colleagues died. From COVID and a lot of this was because they were sent out without masks, without PPE by their proprietors and told ''go get the story'' and in their enthusiasm they did. You know, just like some of us go into war zones to poke a head above the parapet to see what's really going on. So, these are the circumstances that come together in this report. And it does have some suggestions about the bright spots, about what people are doing to make sure there's a clear picture of what's happening. But I think we should start off with a Thomson Reuters report. Will Church of Thomson Reuters that's been doing all of this work and Thomson Reuters, as you know, is a rare thing, lots of news organizations are not for profit, but that's mostly because they can't make a profit. In the case of in the case of, say, The Guardian or Reuters, it's an explicit policy. And Damien is the Professor of Journalism at Oregon University who actually compiled this report and put it together, edited it and a firm piece of work it is as, well laid out good proofreading all the rest of it, I read it. So where should we start? How about you, Damien? Can you summarize the report and what your takeaway from it is?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Sure. Well, Ian, thank you very much for having us. It's great to be here today and to have a chance to share with you and FPA members some of the findings from this report, which came out earlier this month. I think one of the things that was really important for us was to and we can certainly talk more about this from the Foundation's perspective, but I was really keen that we were able to tell the story of what's happened to journalism and journalists around the world, because one of my frustrations when I look at the trade press, both here in the US and also in Europe, is that feels very North America centric, very Western Europe centric. And yet we know and this is one of the things that the report shows that many of the issues that journalists have been grappling with in those environments are universal. So, things like the speed of change with working practices being ripped up overnight and having to adapt to new ways of working, problems and challenges in terms of accessing government data, government officials, questions about the legitimacy of the data that were being presented by government platforms and so forth. Now, all of this - these are issues that we've been seeing all around the world. So, what the report does is tells that story in terms of identifying four key challenges that the industry has been facing, also tries to identify some bright spots. And he said there were many, but a few in terms of, you know, reminding the audience that for all of the challenges, journalists continue to do really important, innovative, impactful work. They continue to make a difference and as you say, often putting their lives and health and well-being on the line to be able to report and tell their stories. I thought it was really important to show the impact of that work. And most importantly, the lens through which this story is told is the lens of these reporters on the ground in 26 different countries, 55 alumni of TRS, Thomson Reuters Foundation's media training programs, and it's their story as they have seen it, that I've then been able to kind of package and put together. And I think that's a very unique way to be able to tell that story with the focus very much being led by the evidence that came in from journalists on the ground working at the coalface and then using that to tell this wider, bigger picture.

**Ian Williams:** And you say there were bright spots people were doing this, but weren't you disturbed by the amount of let's say interference with the truth that was coming from governments?

**Damien Radcliffe:** That's a good question. I mean, sadly, I don't know that I was that surprised. I think one of the one of the trends that we identify in the report is that what we've seen over the course of the last year during the pandemic is just an acceleration of many existing trends. So, we know that journalism and journalists have been under attack for a while and that over the last few years, media freedom has been aggressively attacked in a number of different countries all around the world. And as you said in the intro, that's only increased a lot of more kind of hardline administrations, conservative administrations don't want to waste a good crisis to crack down on the press and to limit press freedom. We definitely seen that. But that's very much an acceleration of existing trends. And the same thing when we look at the financial landscape that journalism is operating under. And we know that the flow of advertising and that had a dramatic, almost overnight impact on the financial health and well-being of many institutions. But that's not a new issue. You know, we know that advertising has been migrating away from traditional media houses, particularly in print towards Google and Facebook in particular for some time, and that media houses have been needing to find new revenue models and new revenue streams. What's just happened over the course of the past year is that, that need has just become amplified and turned up to 11.

**Ian Williams:** We have Roger Kaplan from The American Spectator here, he agrees it's a large question - If the generalization isn't too vast, is it possible to compare the quality of reporting on the epidemic to other times? Professional journalism, do you dare do this?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Well, I mean, I have to say, I think there's been a lot of really good reporting and we identified a number of those examples in the report. There's a chapter that's called Solutions and that identifies and hyperlinks a wide range of different examples of investigative reporting from all around the world, examples of partnerships between different types of organizations coming together and a lot of creativity in terms of outreach. So, I think for me, that was really interesting to see examples of, for example, publications being created and distributed on WhatsApp in Africa or a podcast being created specifically on WhatsApp and distributed in Brazil. You know, a lot of innovation there. BBC Media Action in Bangladesh trying to reach out to Rohingya refugees with kind of five-minute broadcast that are designed to be specifically distributed via loudspeakers in refugee camps to provide public health information. I think these kinds of innovations are incredibly important to capture, to see if we can learn from them, but also to dive into some of that investigative work that CNN is the most cited in the report. And just see, you know, the quality of the work that is being done in terms of holding authority to account and holding public officials’ feet to the fire. I think there's a lot of great work being done. And I disappeared into many a rabbit hole once I found some of these publications and their work because the work was terrific.

**Ian Williams:** You mentioned Brazil there - in the report I was interested, is it five different media organizations got together to try to compile real statistics in despair of the government making any sense of what the government was telling them and how did that work?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Well, that's a good question, and we've seen it in a number of in a number of different countries where there's been a lot of skepticism about government data and how reliable it is. And indeed, really important question around, well, what does the government data actually tell us? Because different governments are capturing different amounts of data and reporting on different indices. And so, it's very difficult to find comparative data. And I just think the Brazil example is an interesting one in terms of journalists saying, "we don't have a lot of trust in in this data." So rather than kind of working individually to try and resolve this, we're much stronger working across different outlets to try and come up with a more comprehensive and robust and reliable picture. And I think that partnership model is a really interesting one to try to share and one that is replicable anywhere around the world.

**Ian Williams:** Were these five competing publications or were they scattered across the country? I'm just thinking of yeah.

**Damien Radcliffe:** I confess, I can't remember this one paragraph in a twenty-one and a half thousand-word report, but it's a great case study. I have to go back and look and come back to you on that.

**Ian Williams:** It was the cooperability that struck me, how useful it was. Like sometimes you'll get a paper, Le Monde and The Guardian or The New York Times collaborating, but they're not in competition. They are less so now with the Internet, I suppose. So, what about you Will, do you want to explain what your programs have been like in training the journalists out there and what's their demand? I mean, because I don't think you're in the camp that thinks that we know best in the West we should go and tell them how to do it.

**Will Church:** Not at all and in fact, there's a lot of evidence that in the geographies we're talking about they might know best on some issues. They've been covering a lot of these issues for longer than we have in the West. I mean, just for some context, we got to March, April last year, Thomson Reuters Foundation runs training programs for journalists, for newsrooms, news organizations, do big ecosystem research and legal analysis. We got to March, April last year. We looked around to see what was going on. Oh, heck, what are we going to do here? And so, we quickly did some initial scoping programming and determined there were real incoming issues affecting journalists that we worked with on a day-to-day basis. So, you were just talking about quality of journalism, "does that vary?" and Damian said there's clearly amazing quality journalism across these regions in the global south and developing countries. But, you know, to continue producing quality journalism is seriously difficult when all your colleagues are losing jobs around you. The freelancer pool is growing exponentially when there's a whole host of new jargon coming into the into the lexicon of all these journalists. And also, because the quality of journalism really depends on access to sources, so there was this great big unknown and our community of journalists are telling us we're lost here, we're really confused. So, we started putting together a series of programming to address these issues. We create something called the COVID Crisis Reporting Hubs, where we put together a program so sort of eight-week programs where we could address things like, obviously the health crisis, but also, you know, what are the economic and social impacts of the pandemic? What is the science behind it? You know, what about the race for a vaccine? How is that going to affect the Western society versus us? And countering misinformation, safety of journalists, your mental health, all these types of things. So, we put together programs of work and we advertised for a trial for 15 journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. And we had 400 to 500 applications for that within a matter of days.

**Ian Williams:** So, these were online? You weren't offering to fly them to London?

**Will Church:** Yeah. I mean, yeah, we had to change also, 30 years of approach to this work overnight, almost to online programming. So, we did that and it was a great lesson learning exercise for us. And since then, we launched a whole host of hubs around the world in multiple languages, plenty in the Russian language, just launched one in Latin America and coming up the Middle East. But as part of that process, we were thinking, hang on, we really need better insight into what our constituents are facing here. And hence we talked to Damien about the possibility of this report, I look after the media freedom side of what the foundation does but we depend on programming, we approach our work through programming. And so, we needed a holistic view of all the different facets of what's happening in the industry related to COVID to inform our programming, to make sure that whatever we do is better targeted, to provide actual solutions, and hence then Damien came onboard.

**Ian Williams:** Also, its good intentions are like gravestones over many of these things that you can say, oh, we will stop false news. And it turns out that false news is what I decide is false. What's inconvenient for me. I mean, we've seen that from Western governments, let alone from any of the Third World governments. So, Angela Merkel I was having to defend her call to say that Trump should be allowed to stay on Twitter, it was dangerous that a private company like Twitter should silence an elected American president and let people know, no, he needed shutting up. But you have to explain the implications to these things - that there are hidden consequences, collateral damage and benefits to taking precipitative action, affecting freedom of speech.

**Will Church:** Well, of course, this all builds on what Damian was talking about, so a lot of the issues on COVID are just exacerbated, accelerated issues that we're facing generally in the media industry. I've only been in this industry 10 years, it's been a bit of a ride in that time. In the last year, everything has just gone supersonic. So, in the Ugandan elections we saw massive takedowns of Facebook and Twitter, also the Trump use was far more important in the West, let's say. But actually, across Africa, that was really meaningful free speech media freedom issues happening that no one was really talking about. Lindsey Hilsum, Channel 4, did a great interview but other than that, you know, it's so hard for us... I'm based in London... to tell the story and to hear the voices of people suffering these really repressive regimes, the freedom crackdowns, industry annihilation almost in some places.

**Ian Williams:** Kristen Saloomey from Al-Jazeera, which key case in the nexus between the Third World and the first world here, Damien, she wants to know what can a US based journalist learn from the developing world? Will, you both of you, in fact, talk about similarities and differences to the situation in the US about the impact of COVID? Can you make those comparisons?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Yeah, I think we can certainly make some. Thank you, Kristen for that question. I think one of the things that I wanted to emphasize in the report was that there are some sort of best practices that we can learn from. So, we've already talked a little bit about partnerships. But I think also in terms of innovation, in terms of storytelling and platforms, ways in which we can engage with audiences and perhaps break through issues like COVID fatigue, which we know from research from the Reuters Institute at Oxford University, is a very real issue. So, we saw a huge spike in interest in in COVID stories at the start of the pandemic. But very quickly, we kind of became fatigued about that. So, finding kind of innovative ways in which we can tell stories I think is really important. There's a great example I included in the report of a publication based in Latvia who came up with a quiz that they just ran on their website around Coronavirus. And you would just kind of navigate your way through that as a way to test your knowledge about what you knew about this novel Coronavirus. I thought that was kind of a really fun and interesting example of a way of essentially creating an explainer that doesn't look like a traditional explainer. I love those kinds of examples. Some of the examples in terms of outreach, which I've talked about already, you know, I'm really curious to see, well, how do we potentially learn from some of those examples and reverse engineer them in areas in the US and elsewhere where there were very pronounced digital divides and people don't necessarily have access to great broadband or mobile connections where they're operating in news deserts and where we need to find new formats for news to be able to reach out to and engage with audiences. So, I think all of that stuff is really important. And then lastly, as Will said, I think it's also useful for us to think about, well, what can we learn from emerging economies and developing nations that have contended with pandemics more recently than we have done in the West, and therefore they've had experience. Experience of what that means for journalism, experience of what that means in terms of relationships with government officials, how to hold your authority to account and so forth, and I'd love to see the training model flipped on its head and for us to be getting training from journalists in Malawi, Uganda, Kenya and other places about how to report on a public health crisis rather than potentially Western journalists parachuting in. I think there's a lot of potential there for us to learn from people who have experienced this type of thing several times. You know, the Coronavirus is not their first rodeo.

**Ian Williams:** Irene Houngbo has picked up on this, " How can the media help leaders and scientists to tackle the pandemic?" And this comes to a sort of delicate relationship again, if you if you discovered a report that said 90 percent of the population of Manhattan is going to be dead in two days, is there a responsible way to break that news, or is it shouting fire in a cinema? Or, if the government says, ""well, it's really much better if you sort of just ignore this and pretend that everyone is going to be getting a second life in two days’ time." So, there's a balance here between public good and your duty to the public to tell them the truth.

**Damien Radcliffe:** Yes, I think alongside that, we also have to recognize that this is such an all-encompassing story that one of the challenges for a lot of journalists is that people are reporting on COVID and COVID related stories who don't necessarily have an underpinning in health or science - that's not their background, that's not been their traditional beat, but it's been an issue which is infused in every in pretty much every story and every beat. And I think that's where the training that Will was talking about with the response hub and initiatives like that is so important because we do need to provide kind of more training to journalists in terms of helping them to understand the science, helping them to understand the data. That's the theme that came out repeatedly in the report of journalists saying, you know, "I had to teach myself a lot of data journalism to be able to make sense of this and to be able to do this report". and their reporting. Alongside that I think also thinking about what the kind of questions are that journalists should be asking, including the caveats around it. Because one of the things that for me is really interesting here is we're seeing developments happening in new news in the scientific community emerging on an almost daily basis and a lot of that is happening very quickly, it's preliminary data. It won't necessarily have been peer reviewed yet or published and so forth. So, there are a lot of caveats that mean that data... are being shared in the public domain that in normal times just wouldn't be, you know, it would be a much later in the process that we would start to have those conversations. And I think one of the challenges for us as journalists is to understand that lexicon, understand that scientific process, and to understand what are the kind of ways in which we need to frame these data and insights to ensure that we're not presenting something as gospel when it might be preliminary data and could therefore cause panic or conversely, hope. You know, we have to we have to understand scientific methodology much more as journalists and also how we can present that in a truthful, honest and factual way to our audiences.

**Ian Williams:** One of the things that struck me, particularly a British government spokesman looking from here as well, is the way that the science was invoked to shut down opposition when in fact, they weren't talking about science - they were talking about pretty shaky ropey statistics and manipulation of statistics and like to say, Will, you know, the courses that you're teaching, to what extent are statistics in that because it's extremely important. Most people don't know the difference between an average, median and incremental growth. And what one percent increase means that transmission rates, things like this, the maps and diagrams to do it, even a great journalist. And it is not the science because a lot of it is probability. Science usually tends to deal with near 100 percent. But the probabilities here are much less off, aren't they?

**Will Church:** Yeah. When there's so much uncertainty, it's a real nightmare. So, I mean, firstly, I would say, yes, there is a lot of data not training, a lot of it, you know, everything's moving so fast. So, we're helping journalists to interpret data as it appears and as it comes down through the system, though, you know, we're certainly helping them approach their health care departments to ask for the right sorts of data, to provide the right sorts of insight that they need. We're also sort of engaging them with people like Google to help them interpret some of that data, that sort of thing as part of the training. It is tricky, you know, when we get the impression certainly that every, you know, especially as borders are closing, that everything is now considered a national effort. So, in the U.K. as well. So, if you're questioning approach or if you're just curious about numbers or what they're saying, any sort of questioning is considered or interpreted as being anti-government or anti national...

**Ian Williams:**  Its wartime reporting almost...

**Will Church:** So, it's proving incredibly difficult. But, you know, this is something, journalists are incredibly resilient and resourceful... in my encounters with them over the years. And it's amazing how they're sort of finding a way through and the resilience that journalists show in general is unlike any other profession I've come across.

**Ian Williams:** I'm going to portmanteau two questions together here from Ali Bullock from CNN and from Frank Gomez. One question is, "how can journalists navigate truly fake journalism, as in the socials and backyard reporters?" Because one of these, in the absence of feet on the ground and the ability to travel, there's even more of a tendency than before the economical imperative that used to exist to rely upon, you know, amateurs, basically, people with a telephone and a smartphone with a camera. But Frank also wants to know, "could there be any sanctions imposed on journalists or media organizations for deliberately fueling the falsehoods, distortions that misinform and harm?". That comes back to the point... who decides which is which here? Feel free, either of you, to address these philosophical questions. The answer is probably 42, I suspect.

**Will Church:** Yeah, exactly. And that's reality, I think. I think at TRF we certainly... we fall back on a lot of the Reuters principles that a lot of other big international organizations have, so, impartiality, free from bias, these types of things. And it's always boring when we are repeating that mantra a lot, we work with eight hundred journalists a year and it's often "yeah we know that" but in times like this, you've got to kind of reemphasize that when you're in a war, you can't be accused of having any form of slip up or you cannot report something incorrectly. If your facts are wrong, if your interpretation is wrong, immediately you can be labeled as a purveyor of fake news or someone who peddles untruths. So, first off, you've got to get it right. The other big thing that I think a lot of our guys are facing is, it's a new way of doing things like fact checking as a journalistic tool... as a journalistic product. So increasingly, BBC, Reuters, we have Al Jazeera Arabic fact checking departments that will not, in fact, check individual articles, but to go out and check on the biggest rumors of the day or whatever they are. And there was a time, I remember, when the big rumor is back in the day that Mubarak had been killed or had died in Egypt... and there was this vacuum of information. And it used to be that you didn't report on rumor, you know, you never reported a rumor, you just reported facts, etc. and now you have to report on rumor, you have to counter all these rumors because otherwise, you know, into a vacuum, you know, false information flows. That's hard when newsrooms journalists are under-resourced, they're small, they are hand-to-mouth, creating that sort of, that tool and that process is a big job for a small organization. Whose job is it? Is it the national broadcaster's job, is an independent newspaper, the small local radio station? So, these things have all just been exacerbated and. Exploded during Soviet.

**Damien Radcliffe:** I think alongside that, one of the big philosophical questions that news organizations have been grappling with, particularly during the pandemic, but it predates that is to understand, well, how do we frame reporting that is perhaps debunking falsehoods? And is there a risk that actually reporting on falsehoods just amplifies that story and that all people remember is the headline? They don't necessarily read the full story or don't necessarily appreciate the context and the nuance of it. And so, I think that's a really interesting question that I know, newsrooms have been grappling with for some time. I think we've seen a lot of that in the Trump era here in the States where, you know, there was research which showed that the majority of misinformation as it related to COVID stemmed from Trump. But if you drill down further into that, actually it stemmed from reporting of what Trump was saying. And so, there are really interesting kind of philosophical questions there. I want to go back to the two questions you asked earlier Ian, and the answer is always 42, obviously, but into the question about boots on the ground. Actually, this is one of the things I forgot to mention when we had that earlier question around what else we can we learn from emerging economies and journalism in the global south? I think trying to find for international outlets, opportunities for them as much as possible to work with journalists who are on the ground and who are familiar with that territory, Will's already alluded to this. You know, we've seen thousands of journalists lose their jobs all around the world, and we've seen a massive influx of more people becoming freelancers as a result, not necessarily out of choice, but because their permanent jobs at news outlets have disappeared. So, we know that there are thousands of journalists who are very experienced and well-placed to tell the story of what's happening in their own backyard and that they are also really keen to try and find opportunities to tell those stories internationally. A lot of those freelance opportunities have disappeared both at national and international level but I think that's one way in which potentially working in partnership rather than potentially reporting from a distance or parachuting journalists in, I think that's something I'd love to see more of. And to Frank's question about sanctions. One interesting thing that we saw was putting together the report was that we are hearing about governments who are potentially penalizing media outlets who criticize their approach or perhaps are not toeing the party line, and that can take numerous forms. So, there was an example in Tanzania of a TV station that was suspended for nearly a year, for 11 months as a result of reporting that the government disagreed with. In Zambia, there was an outlet who refused to run, essentially what looked to be sort of PSA's that the government wanted them to run because the government was already in arrears with other previous advertising campaigns. And so, the government took away their license. And, you know, this is really challenging, in a lot of developing countries where the government is a major advertiser or major source of revenue, and that inevitably, over the course of the past year has led to some conflicts between journalists wanting to do their job and governments who might not necessarily agree with the story that journalists are telling.

**Ian Williams:** Speaking of telling the story it suddenly occurred to me that we're three Brits so obviously like science fiction. The number 42 is a reference to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, where there's a long shaggy mouse story that involves trying to find the answer to the questions of the universe. And the answer is 42. That's why the number has come up several times. Roger Kaplan says, "there are whole battalions of journalists who cover health and medicine, is it possible to assess how well they exercise the basics of putting the breaking news in lay friendly terms and at the same time putting seriously skeptical questions to government health authorities?" Do you find the profession, ask good questions and translate it accurately, what they heard and saw?

**Will Church:** Well, I would say in a lot of the regions where I focus my day-to-day work, I don't think there are legions of health reporters. I don't want to pick on a country, but there's generally geographic differences in the level of journalism as a whole. There are obviously very good journalists in every country for sure. I think in terms of what's expected of a journalist, in certain countries, it does vary. Part of our role, we often find, not that we want to go in like this, but we often find that part of our role is explaining the role of a journalist to journalists. Often the journalist has come through an effort, through connections in the industry, they might not have the education, might not have done any formal training. Often making sure people understand what they're supposed to be doing is something that we have to build in from the beginning of our work with any particular journalism or even a news organization. A lot of startups we see around the world are people with not vested interest, but people who really care about their community or care about issues, but actually don’t have any formal training. So, they don't know what they should be doing or what questions and how to ask a balanced question. What is the responsibility of the consequence of writing a headline that is actually going to distort the conversation or distort someone's view? So, I think journalists who understand the remit and roles they have are way more likely to ask the appropriate questions to governments. And of course, that varies in terms of, you know, are you going to be singled out if you ask a difficult question, are you going to be excluded from the next meeting? That's happening a lot now with Zoom calls, they just don't accept you. It was easier when you could turn up and bang on the door of a health center.

**Damien Radcliffe:** I was going say the same thing that I think one of the biggest issues has been access. There has been a purposeful reduction of access to journalists, so it's actually been incredibly hard to ask those kinds of questions. We've seen people at different types of outlets often being shut out of press conferences in terms of like physical press conferences or not able to join as in Zoom conversations. And then if they are often no questions are taken. So, it can actually be very, very difficult to ask the right questions, even if you've got them in your notebook and you know exactly what you want to ask. Having the opportunity to have that dialogue with officials and to be able to do that on the record is incredibly difficult. And it's not just with officials, it's also with our expert sources. So, one of the examples you highlight in the report is some doctors in Turkey who were arrested for talking to the media about the realities of COVID. That's something that we've seen multiple cases of the sources, medical sources and people working in the health professions are really, really wary about talking to journalists and talking to journalists on the record right now. And that's something we have to be very cognizant of. And there's a lot of concern now just about being identified, but also around the way in which certain tools could be used nefariously. So, a good example of that would be track and trace apps that some countries have developed and encourage people to put on their phone. You know, that essentially allows you to geo locate where people have been so you could very quickly potentially identify a journalist X and health profession professional, Y were in the same place at the same time, that's their source. And, you know, this becomes a very complex space where even if you are able to ask questions, protection of sources right now, I think is a huge issue and one we probably should be making more noise about.

**Ian Williams:** Do you have courses on that? Because, it's become a serious issue, if you use your cell phone to talk to a confidential source, then the source is not going to be confidential as soon as somebody switches their computer on and does the tracking from the tower.

**Will Church:** Yeah. I mean, yeah, legal dangers, safety of yourself and your sources is pretty integral work these days more than ever. And certainly, on these hubs, it's been included. As our report shows, there's so many different ways now which you can be caught out as a journalist. So again, it's the sticking to tried and tested journalistic principles, being transparent. We have to help and people have to realize that journalists have to assess their own situation and that of their sources and make a decision. And the editors have to understand that as well.

**Ian Williams:** Well, going back to your point earlier, only this week the British health minister walked out of a Zoom conference, as I saw, with a bit of horror on a prime-time television show. She just shut up and said "no". I mean it did her more damage than anything but at the same time, it is not good for transparency and public faith if your health minister can't answer your question without exploding.

**Will Church:** Yes, it was a terrible incident.

**Ian Williams:** Kristen Saloomey comes in again and she said, on the social media fake news debate and it comes back to my question about the Angela Merkel debate, who's better able to police fake news in your opinion, governments or social media companies? If sunlight is the best disinfectant are media up to the job? And if I can continue on that, I noticed towards the end you talk about the contributions, the good things that Facebook and Google and others have done to help contribute towards the sort of tail end of the financial aspects of the crash of media. I've always thought if they just made sure that journalists were paid when their work was plagiarized, several sites, even a fraction of a penny per person per rip off, would actually do a lot to contribute to the economic health of journalism. But, you know, you answer that one now...

**Will Church:** It's going to be really fascinating to see what happens in Australia, whether Google follow through with their threat to pull out of searches, that as a government there they'll set up a system by which they'll have to pay for media they use or display. It's happening in France as well so very interesting at the moment. I think it's all under wraps, in what deal would be made. But anyway, I think we have to leave it to academics to determine who is best placed to do it. Obviously, the media industry won't give up, won't give in without a fight, but it's not concerning - the concern I have, is, if what we do in the West sets a precedent for the rest of the world and how they should manage social media going forward, there are certain governments that you wouldn't trust at all to be in that position. And when you look at countries like Philippines where the internet's basically Facebook, that one company holds pretty much access to the Internet, everything is done through Facebook. You worry that if too much power is in the hands of that company it's a recipe for disaster. So, you got governments, the companies and then the media industry themselves. But it's, there's no clean answer.

**Ian Williams:** When you have a monopoly company like that, it makes it very vulnerable to the government at the best of times in lots of ways, of regulatory or even, hey, pull the plug or else the Chinese approach, right?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Well, I mean, you've seen that you've seen that with the approach of some of those big Silicon Valley's to China for example, where arguably some of their principles have gone out the window because there's a one-billion-person market that they are desperate to want to tap into. I think just to go back to your question Ian about you know, I did highlight that in the report because I thought it was important to mention that, you know, there has been this investment from these platforms but as we also note, it's a drop in the ocean in terms of what is needed. And the sheer volume of applicants for those funding programs was huge. I mean, your percentage ratio, likelihood of success was very small, you know, Will give an indication of the demand that they saw for their reporting hub in Africa. We've seen similar kinds of numbers and similar kind of success ratios for funding from the likes of Google or Facebook. I would say I think there are two interesting dimensions to that question that we haven't talked about. One is to this question of sunlight as a disinfectant. I think it's really important that we have to talk about the trust with which journalism and the news media is held... around the world it's very easy for us to assume if journalists are doing a good job, then that will punch through and unfortunately, that's not the case. So, one of the examples I cite in the report is a survey from YouGov that was conducted in 26 different countries during the early stages of the pandemic and found that in every country, bar one, which was Malaysia, people said they trusted their friends and family more on COVID information than the media. And I think that's a very troubling statistic and one that perhaps shouldn't surprise us. But I imagine most people's friends and family are not experts and will not be as plugged in to the data and the reality as a lot of journalists are. But people are trusting friends and family. They're trusting material that is shared with them on closed social networks, as well as kind of more public platforms. So, it's very difficult for us to punch through, even with really good reporting. And I think that's a huge issue. And that lends itself to the second issue I wanted to highlight, which is one around news literacy and media literacy, which I think has been shown to be more important than ever during the course of an epidemic that ensuring that audiences and citizens, media consumers have the skills that they need to interrogate the media that they're consuming and that they do so with a critical eye. And I think that doesn't happen often enough. And we need to be talking more about how we can equip people on the ground who are consuming media with the skills they need to be critical information consumers.

**Ian Williams:** I think the most despondent making piece of information in there was when populations were asked to assess their trust in the media. China, India, the Philippines I believe it was, Indonesia. I mean, these are countries with almost completely controlled media. And there was a high degree of trust, I suppose, because they didn't hear any other news. Or do you have an explanation for why there would be such a degree of trust in the Chinese media, for example?

**Damien Radcliffe:** Well, I suspect Will can probably answer that question better than me, but I think what it shows is there isn't necessarily a direct link between media freedom and trust in media. You might kind of assume that there is until you start to dive into some of the reports from Freedom House, for example, and others which show that kind of correlation. And I suspect it is probably, as you say, and in part because of the narrow lens of news as it is presented to audiences. You don't necessarily have kind of conflicting information sources that you can then consume and read and from that try and make up your own mind as to kind of where on that truth continuum, you think reality actually lies?

**Ian Williams:** We're still very much the media’s... ever since the 2008 meltdown on the electronic meltdown, the transfer, the media has been in terra incognita in terms of what revenue, model, circulation, trust, etc. And Simon Locke is asking about whether paid digital firewalls to access the media, "are they part of the problem or part of the solution?" I mean, I tend to think media should be free because I try to consume so much of it. It'd cost me a fortune if I had to subscribe to every site I click.

**Will Church:** I mean, that's journalism. Journalists need to be paid and good journalism costs money but in certain parts of the world, it's expensive. It's a balance you've got to make about reaching the most amount of people with trusted, trustworthy news vs. keeping the industry alive and keeping a good, strong and responsible industry going. And in a lot of the places where I tend to focus my work, it's just it's not possible to have paywalls in general for certain niche areas and financial news or certain other industries so it's definitely something to be looked at. But actually, there are there are tons of other ways of making money than just digital paywalls. We work with about twenty-seven newsrooms this quarter and each individual newsroom has its own way of making money. So, we work with a newsroom, in Liberia, they have a printing press. We help them just to convert that into printing other things during the week, you know, so they can bring in extra revenues to non-journalism revenues, a lot of media under pressure in certain countries can tap into a diaspora in the West, for instance, a journalist in Moldova can tap into UK and Ireland communities, they really want to understand real news from those companies. And the other big thing in what we're seeing in in countries where media freedom is at risk. So, let's say the advertising market is under state capture, so there's no access to local advertising. You can actually go direct to the big players. You can go directly to Coca-Cola, and we try to help them with that. Coca should be able to pay directly into a news media company that they can trust, is producing fair, accurate reporting, bypass the local market and actually sort of bring better awareness to a brand that's important for free press in that country. And we've got a million examples of this.

**Ian Williams:** So, it does work then? I mean, obviously let's not get bowled with the idea of altruism, but you can put pressure on Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola in the headquarters here, you know, through shareholders.

**Will Church:** You can do it yes. I mean, not often.

**Ian Williams:** There we are, truth in advertising.

**Damien Radcliffe:** I would just add to that, I do think Simon made a very good point that it is an issue in places where there are paywalls. We've seen over the course of the last few years a greater shift to reader revenue as a primary source of income for more and more media outlets. And the number of free stories you can access before you hit, they pay are typically, typically reducing. And we've seen more paywalls introduced and you're hitting the paywall much quicker over the course of the past year. So, I think that inevitably will push some consumers towards free media and that free media might not be as accurate or as trustworthy. And we also shouldn't forget that many people are suffering a lot of financial hardships right now as a result of job losses, pay cuts, furloughs and so forth. And, you know, at a time when your household income may well be reduced, having additional things to pay for, like media might just be one thing too many. And so, we have to be very cognizant of that, that, yes, good journalism needs to be paid for but paywalls are not the only solution as part of that revenue mix.

**Ian Williams:** Some media outlets were putting their COVID stories on their free section. Is that general or has there been much of that? Is there pressure? Can you apply pressure for people to make vital information like this free?

**Damien Radcliffe:** That's certainly been the case here in the States and indeed in some other countries, but we've also seen examples like McClatchy here in the US, a big local newspaper group. They decided a couple of months into the pandemic that actually they were going to start to put their COVID content behind a paywall because they were continuing to see advertising rates drop. They needed to try and plug that revenue source and they thought that readers subscriptions were the primary way to be able to do that. So not everybody's been making their COVID content free. And, you know, I think another issue for foreign news organizations is, you know, you might make the COVID content free, but what you really want to do is then develop a deeper relationship with that audience. So, they come to you for A but then you need to introduce them to some evergreen content or something that is non COVID related to nurture that relationship, which hopefully will then translate into a meaningful long term, ideally financial relationship. But I suspect the bounce rate from COVID stories has probably been quite high.

**Ian Williams:** So, we're coming towards the end. What's your next venture to take this forward? You've got the report. What are you doing to implement its conclusions?

**Will Church:** I mean, from Thomson Reuters Foundation, I would say it's vital for us to help us design our programming. When we're talking to big international donors or partners, we have something to lean on and say, look, here's the evidence of all this going on. But also, you know, what's important is that when we are tackling a problem or targeting a problem, we have to look at the holistic issues. You can't just you can't tackle poor standards of journalism or poor attention to detail and fact checking if actually that journalist is about to lose their job and their news organization is about to go down the can and they can't even go to get the quote that we keep telling them they need to get; you've got to look at it as a whole. So, I mean, it might be region by region or country by country or whatever it is. But for us, it's a critical tool for us to use. I also want to make sure that our community are reading it and absorbing it themselves. Our job is to empower journalism and news organizations to help themselves. I've been a big believer that the media industry has to kind of work together to get through this period and probably through the next decade or two as well. But we're not in a bubble anymore of massive revenues and "leave us alone". So, I want our community to make sure they are absorbing the issues that are affecting them, but also our peers and our international development sector. You know, there's a massive rush to provide aid relief in the pandemic. We want to make sure that the role the media plays in solving massive issues isn't forgotten, isn't lost in a rush to provide instant aid and resources.

**Ian Williams:** I forgot I meant to say earlier but got diverted to cry out and point out that our colleagues at the Overseas Press Club and the Deadline Club in New York with help from the Ford Foundation, have actually been issuing scholarships and grants to suffering freelance journalists. So, I'm very pleased with that initiative, even more pleased if I got some of it. But that's another story. But it shows there is a sense of solidarity here. And people realize that the shift in the industry to freelancing is, well, semi-permanent and that the models don't really take account of it.

**Will Church:** Now, if I was to say in my 10 years... in my 10 or 11 years in this in this field, the message is getting through, like people are realizing the role and responsibility of journalists. They know it's in peril know what that is needed. And so, there are bright, bright sparks.

**Ian Williams:** This is Ian Williams from The Foreign Press Association. Thank you very much to Damien Radcliffe and to Will Church and to everyone for attending this lively, informative and I hope, productive discussion for all concerned. Thank you.