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Reset required?

Evaluating the Media Freedom Coalition after its first two years

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February 2022

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) in its first two years of operation, from 2019 to 2021. The MFC is a partnership of 50 countries working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists.

Our independent report is based on over 100 interviews with relevant stakeholders; analyses of news coverage, social media commentary and public statements; and a survey of media freedom campaigners – as well as detailed case studies in Sudan and the Philippines. We are a team of six academics and researchers from the UK, Sudan and the Philippines, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK and the Global Challenges Research Fund.

We ask one central question: **is the Media Freedom Coalition working?**

We have assessed the Coalition it by its own pledges: 1) to promote accountability by 'raising the cost' to those who abuse or violate media freedom; 2) to hold its own members to account over media freedom violations; 3) to work together as a coalition, expand the membership and collaborate with partners (including the Consultative Network, UNESCO and the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom; 4) to 'shine a spotlight' on the issue of media freedom by raising awareness of it; and 5) to develop and defend the media by providing practical support to independent media around the world.

We find that, after two years, the Media Freedom Coalition is only partially achieving its objectives. It has taken some positive steps towards its ambitious goals including attracting a relatively large membership and establishing collegiate ways of working. The Coalition has also had some early successes. Several states – such as the Maldives and Sierra Leone – have made positive improvements domestically, as a direct result of joining the MFC and there have been several instances of successful private diplomacy by Coalition members working together. The independent High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom – established at the request of the MFC – has also published four substantive reports detailing precisely how MFC member states can support media freedom; through targeted sanctions, providing emergency visas for journalists at risk, strengthening consular support and creating a standing international Investigative Task Force.

However, partly because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the actions of the MFC have not been as rapid, bold or visible as was initially promised. So far, its working methods have been slow and lacking transparency, its communications poor, its financial commitments small, and its political impacts have been minimal. Overall, the MFC requires a re-set and re-injection of energy and funds in the next two to three years if it is to achieve its original aims.

The MFC has itself recognised many of these issues and is working to address them. It has a new secretariat, Executive Group members and online presence. Given this, the growing international profile of media freedom more generally, and the apparent easing of restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic – there is reason to believe that the MFC will be able to achieve the re-set we believe is required for it to achieve its original aims.

Media Freedom Coalition Scorecard

We have assessed and awarded a mark for each of the MFC's five main objectives and given an overall score of AMBER/RED.[1]



Scorecard for the MFC's five main objectives:



1. Promoting accountability: This objective is only partially met because the Media Freedom Coalition has not been bold or public enough with its joint statements about countries violating media freedom. However, there have been some successful examples of private diplomacy.



2. Creating internal accountability: Achievements in this area have been poor because members within the Coalition have not been publicly held to account or excluded by their peers when they have violated media freedoms. Core members of the Coalition are not leading sufficiently by example, by adopting recommendations for change 'at home'.



3. Working together: Despite the enormous challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the MFC has successfully worked together, shared information and convened a relatively large group of like-minded states. Membership of the Coalition has prompted positive change by a handful of states. However, collaboration with the Consultative Network and the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom could still be improved.



4. 'Shining a spotlight' on media freedom: The Coalition has failed to generate any significant press coverage of its activities, except around its initial conference in 2019. It has been largely invisible due to a weak online presence and lack of a communications strategy, for the first two years of operations. As a result, its activities – indeed the very existence of the MFC – have been practically hidden from general view.



5. Developing and defending the media: The funds allocated to support media freedom under the MFC have been small. In the Philippines and Sudan (our case-studied countries), funded projects were relevant and well executed. However, they were an adjunct to diplomatic efforts and had little impact on levels of media freedom in these two countries.

[1] Green = Strong achievement across the board
Green/Amber = Satisfactory achievement in most areas but partial achievement in others
Amber/Red = Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas with some positive elements
Red = Poor achievement across most areas with urgent remedial action required in some

Recommendations

To strengthen the work of the MFC moving forward, we propose the following:

Recommendation 1: The MFC should formally agree and implement a clear and transparent process for determining which 'situations of concern' it chooses to highlight in its joint statements.[2]

Recommendation 2: The MFC should provide a substantive response to each of the advisory reports published by the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, detailing how and when MFC members intend to implement their recommendations.[3]

Recommendation 3: The minimum requirement for retaining membership of the MFC should be strengthened to include, for example: adopting a National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, contributing to the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund, adopting a certain number of recommendations from the High Level Panel, and signing a significant proportion of the MFC's joint statements. Members that do not respect the principles contained in the Global Pledge should be monitored closely leading to swift suspension or expulsion.

Recommendation 4: The MFC should implement a communications strategy which improves its online presence and pro-actively raises the profile of the Coalition and its work (especially its joint statements and the work of the High Level Panel), and facilitate more frequent communications with the Consultative Network and other relevant stakeholders.

Recommendation 5: The MFC's current 'diplomacy-heavy, grant-light' approach should be re-set to include a much stronger emphasis on providing financial support for media sustainability.

Recommendation 6: The MFC should clarify the theory of change underpinning its activities and institute a system of monitoring, evaluation and learning to improve the coherence and effectiveness of its work. In particular, the MFC must ensure that its actions are informed by an understanding of the complex, dynamic and diverse priorities of the journalists and media workers around the world.

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[2] This case management policy should clarify: (a) the criteria and timeline for selecting cases; (b) the process for providing feedback to the CN, when the cases they suggest are not adopted; (c) an obligation for states and their embassies to nominate cases, rather than only the CN; (d) that all cases highlighted by the CN are shared with the entire MFC, even if no action is taken; and (e) the process to be adopted for highlighting *systemic* abuses of media freedom.

[3] The High Level Panel have produced four advisory reports requesting action by state members of the MFC on the following topics: 1) 'The Use of Targeted Sanctions to Protect Journalists', which recommends the consistent use of targeted financial and travel sanctions as a tool to enforce compliance with international human rights law; 2) 'Providing Safe Refuge to Journalists at Risk' - via the introduction of a new emergency visa for journalists at risk; 3) 'Protecting and Promoting Press Freedom by Strengthening Consular Support to Journalists at Risk'; and 4) 'Promoting More Effective Investigations into Abuses Against Journalists', including the creation of a standing international Investigative Task Force. (See: www.ibanet.org/HRI-Secretariat/Reports#Advisory).

About the Authors and the Approach

Our team: We are a team of six academics and researchers from the UK, Sudan and the Philippines (City, University of London, University of East Anglia, UK and University of the Philippines-Diliman). We are an independent team, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK and the Global Challenges Research Fund. We have been studying the MFC since it was formally launched in 2019. Since the outset officials both in the UK and Canada have welcomed our study as an opportunity for the MFC to submit to outside scrutiny and have afforded us considerable access.

We have interviewed more than 50 civil servants and international stakeholders about the Coalition. We have also analysed news coverage; conducted content analysis of public speeches, statements etc.; and surveyed media practitioners and campaigners. In addition, we have conducted two field studies in Sudan and the Philippines (65 further interviews), looking at how projects funded by MFC members have been implemented and received by local actors including journalists and media freedom activists. In this report, we have preserved the anonymity of all our interviewees, unless the material is in the public domain. This evaluation is one of several outputs associated with our wider study entitled 'Researching Media Freedom in a Time of Crisis'.[4]

Authors biographies:

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Defining our terms: Given the UK's central role in establishing and co-convening the MFC, we do, at times, place particular emphasis on the UK's actions. However, this report is about the MFC in general, and the various strands of work associated with it. These include not only the actions of the

[4] Further information about this research project is available at www.pressfreedom.co.uk

member states but also the work and actions of the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, the civil society Consultative Network (CN), and of UNESCO and its Media Defence Fund. This ecosystem of initiatives was established around the same time, mainly at the initial Conference in London in July 2019 (with the CN established in January 2020).

Sometimes the actions of the Coalition members, particularly its founders, UK and Canada, are referred to as a 'campaign'.[5] The UK Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) launched what it calls its Global Campaign for Media Freedom (GCMF) at the same time as initiating the whole Coalition in partnership with Canada. To avoid confusion, particularly with the bilateral actions taken by the UK during the same period, we refer to the global initiative as the 'Coalition' rather than a campaign. To be clear, our main focus is not the success, or otherwise, of the UK's specific campaign, but whether the Media Freedom Coalition, as a whole, is working effectively to defend media freedom.

In terms of evaluation, we are solely focused on the Coalition, not on evaluating the Consultative Network, the High Level Panel, or the UNESCO Media Defence Fund. It is also important to note that, because the MFC has only been operational for just over two years, this review is preliminary and partial. (In its terms of reference, the MFC has committed to a 'comprehensive review of its objectives and purpose every five years').

Our scoring system: We have adopted a colour-coded scoring system for our assessment of the MFC's progress since 2019, outlined in the MFC Scorecard presented overleaf.

Green = Strong achievement across the board.
Green/Amber = Satisfactory achievement in most areas but partial achievement in others. Amber/Red = Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas with some positive elements.
Red = Poor achievement across most areas with urgent remedial action required in some.

We have borrowed this system from the UK's Independent Commission for Aid Impact (ICAI) because we find it useful and intuitive but we are not associated with ICAI or the UK Government.

[5] For example, UNESCO refers to it as a 'campaign' in its 2021 'World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development Report' p. 12: "In 2019, the United Kingdom and Canadian governments launched the Media Freedom *Campaign*, triggering the creation of a coalition of governments and working in partnership with civil society organisations." (Author's italics).

Acronyms and Abbreviations

BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation

CAD – Canadian Dollar

CIMA – Center for International Media Assistance (at the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington D.C.)

CN – Civil society Consultative Network (formerly Advisory Network) to the MFC

CSO – Civil Society Organisation

DFID – (formerly) UK's Department for International Development

EU – European Union

EUR – Euro

FCDO – Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office of the UK (formerly FCO)

FoE – Freedom of Expression

GBP – Pounds Sterling

GCMF – Global Campaign for Media Freedom (UK)

GMDF – Global Media Defence Fund

HR – Human rights

IBAHRI – International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

MFC – Media Freedom Coalition

MFC-CN – Civil society Consultative Network (formerly Advisory Network) to the MFC

NAP – National Action Plan

NGO – Non-Government Organisation

OECD – Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OHCHR – UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

PPASJ – Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists

RSF – Reporters Sans Frontières (Reporters without Borders)

SLAPP – Strategic lawsuit against public participation

ToR – Terms of reference

UEA – University of East Anglia

UN – United Nations

UNESCO – United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation

USD – US Dollar

WPFD – World Press Freedom Day

Contents

Executive Summary **3**
Media Freedom Coalition scorecard 4
Recommendations 5

Introduction **10**

Background **12**
Official structure, purpose, approach and activities to date 13
Other stakeholders: structure, purpose, approach and activities to date 14

Section 1. Promoting accountability for violations of media freedom **18**
1.1. Volume of public statements 19
1.2. Focus of public statements 21
1.3. Signatories of public statements 23
1.4. The potential impact of the MFC's public statements 25
1.5. Private diplomacy 26
1.6. Sanctions 27

Section 2. Creating Internal Accountability **29**
2.1. Holding each other to account? 29
2.2. Leading by example: are the core members protecting media freedom at home? 31

Section 3. Working Together **34**
3.1. Convening and expanding the group 34
3.2. Filling a gap in international provision 36
3.3. Motivations for joining: 'Carrot' and 'Stick' 38
3.4. Internal resourcing and collaboration: looking to the future of the Coalition and its membership 39

Section 4. Shining a Spotlight on media freedom? **41**
4.1. Generating news coverage and discussion on social media 42
4.2. Raising international attention 45
4.3. Recognition amongst media support practitioners 48

Section 5. Developing and Defending the Media **50**
5.1. What monetary pledges have been made? 50
5.2. How have funds been spent? 52
5.3. Have funds been well-spent? 55
5.3.1. Media Development Projects in the Philippines 56
5.3.2. Media Development Projects in Sudan 56

Conclusion **59**

Acknowledgements **61**

Annex: Case Studies - MFC on the Ground in Sudan and the Philippines **62**



Lancaster House at the first Global Media Freedom Conference in London, July 2019

Introduction

The Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) was formed in July 2019 at the Global Conference for Media Freedom in London.[6] It is a partnership of 50 countries working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists and hold to account those who harm journalists for doing their job. The purpose of this report is to evaluate the MFC after its first two years of operation, from 2019 to 2021. It is based on independent research undertaken by a team of academics from the UK, Sudan and the Philippines.

The report focuses on one key question: ***is the Media Freedom Coalition working?***

However, answering this question is a challenge because there has been no formal evaluation framework set by the MFC to date, and no explicit theory of change. As one UK Ambassador told us, *"I am not sure what success looks like for the Coalition to be honest."* Given this, we judge the MFC by the goals and values most commonly articulated in its public declarations and consider how the actions it has taken measure up. In other words, we assess the MFC against its own implicit yardsticks.

Our focus is on the extent to which the implementation gap – between adopted international legal standards, and their application through concrete actions – has been filled by the actions of the MFC. The report is divided into five sections.

In the first, **'promoting accountability'** section, we analyse the extent to which the MFC has been able to hold other states accountable for media freedom violations, through joint statements and private diplomacy.

[6] Image by FCDO under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)

In the second, **'creating internal accountability'** section, we assess to what extent the MFC has held its *own* members to account and promoted media freedom at home.

In the **'working together'** section we look at internal collaboration within the Coalition and the extent to which the MFC has attracted new members, shared information and collaborated internally, and with partners.

Fourthly, in the **'shining a spotlight'** section, we assess the extent to which the MFC has managed to draw national and international attention to the issue of media freedom, through communications, media coverage and internationally, such as in multilateral fora.

In the fifth section **'developing and defending the media'**, we examine how, and with what effect, the MFC has directly supported journalistic activities on the ground.

At the end, we have included two case studies which examine how, and to what extent, the MFC has impacted journalism and media freedom on the ground in Sudan and the Philippines.

Our conclusions and recommendations are addressed to the MFC and its stakeholders, with the aim of strengthening the work of the Coalition as it moves forward.



Chrystia Freeland, Amal Clooney and Jeremy Hunt at the launch of the MFC at the first Global Media Freedom Conference in London, July 2019

Background

The MFC 'is a cross-regional collaboration with 50 countries.[7] These countries are working together proactively to advocate for media freedom at home and abroad'.

All members of the Coalition have signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom, which is 'a written commitment to improving media freedom domestically and working together internationally'.[8] The Pledge commits those governments that sign it to:

- Speak out and take action together, through the Media Freedom Coalition
- Harness the power of diplomatic networks, through a new Media Freedom Contact Group
- Reinforce international initiatives to champion media freedom
- Meet annually to renew their commitments and to address emerging threats and opportunities[9]

The pledge was published and signed as part of the Global Conference for Media Freedom hosted by the UK and Canadian Governments in London on 10th and 11th July 2019 (published in English and French). The MFC was originally established by the UK's then Foreign Secretary, Jeremy Hunt as part of the UK Government's 'Global Campaign for Media Freedom' in 2019, alongside Chrystia Freeland, Canada's then Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Coalition's terms of reference (ToR) were agreed by senior officials of all members (at the time) in Geneva in January 2020.[10]

[7] Image by FCDO under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)
[8] FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Media Freedom Coalition: an overview, Gov.uk, July 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-an-overview/media-freedom-coalition-an-overview
[9] The full text of the MFC pledge can be found here: FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Global pledge on media freedom, Gov.uk, July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-pledge-on-media-freedom
[10] The full text of the Coalition's Terms of Reference can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference

The Coalition is multi-pronged, working at different levels – international, national, local – and involves both governmental and non-governmental actors. The following is a short description of its different strands, beginning with its official structure.

Official structure, purpose, approach and activities to date

As of January 2022, the MFC has 50 member states. The MFC's Executive Group currently includes: the Governments of the UK (outgoing Co-Chair), Canada (Co-Chair), the Netherlands (Co-Chair), the Czech Republic, Estonia, Ghana and the US along with representation from the civil society Consultative Network (CN), UNESCO and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR).[11] The UK stepped down as Co-Chair in early 2022 to hand over to the Netherlands. Former members of the Executive Group include Germany, Latvia and the Maldives.

There are small 'media freedom teams' of civil servants in the UK's FCDO and Global Affairs Canada. While the UK has, *de facto*, been providing much of the secretariat function to date, an independent contractor for the secretariat has recently been outsourced and funded by the UK's FCDO for the next two years.

The Coalition has committed to meeting annually at Ministerial level and 'officials of the Coalition expect to meet at least once per year and partake in teleconferences as necessary'.[12] The 2nd Global Conference was convened by Canada and Botswana and was held entirely online, because of COVID restrictions, on 16th November 2020.[13] The 3rd MFC Conference will be hosted by Estonia in February 2022.

One of the Coalition's key activities is issuing statements that condemn those who attack media freedom: 22 of these statements have been issued to date and are published on the MFC's website.[14] Another key activity is coordinating diplomatic lobbying behind closed doors. The Coalition is advised by a civil society CN, UNESCO and OHCHR.[15] According to the ToR, the CN plays a key role in suggesting what cases should be addressed by the MFC.[16] We discuss the statement process under 'Promoting Accountability' (see Section 1).

The MFC is also supposed to check on and support media reforms among its own members, and where necessary, condemn those members who are infringing media freedoms. The Coalition specifies that any country or 'situation' in the world can be scrutinised, including member countries

[11] These 'original members of the EG' were identified and selected by the founding co-Chairs, UK and Canada, 'in response to an expression of interest' (Terms of Reference of Media Freedom Coalition (2020))
[12] Terms of Reference of Media Freedom Coalition (2020)
[13] See 2nd Global Conference news release: https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/11/canada-concludes-second-global-conference-for-media-freedom-at-time-of-unprecedented-challenge.html
[14] 'Cases and situations of concern' are defined as follows: *'individual cases and situations where those individuals practising journalism, as well as media organisations, have come under threat, to reduce cases of impunity...'* (Statement by the Media Freedom Coalition on its first meeting, Gov.uk, February 2020 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-january-2020-meeting-statement/statement-by-the-media-freedom-coalition-on-its-first-meeting). For example, the following statement made on Myanmar published 16 April 2021 by MFC, https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/activities/joint-statements/2021/media-freedom-in-myanmar-media-freedom-coalition-statement
[15] 'The EG [Executive Group of the Coalition] is expected to draw on input from the Advisory [Consultative] Network and multilateral organisations to inform discussions by inviting relevant organisations to participate in discussions of the EG or MFC. Three representatives chosen by the Advisory [Consultative] Network are expected to be invited to participate in meetings of the Executive Group. UNESCO and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights also are expected to be invited to participate in such meetings.' Terms of Reference of Media Freedom Coalition (2020)
[16] 'Through the Executive Group, the Advisory [Consultative] Network expects to identify cases which should be addressed through diplomatic intervention either publicly or privately. The EG expects to discuss and decide on which of these cases to take forward to the wider Coalition.' Point 5.4 of Terms of Reference.

themselves.[17] We look at holding member-nations accountable (see 'Creating Internal Accountability', Section 2).

From the outset, a key feature of the campaign was to 'work together proactively to advocate for media freedom at home and abroad' as a coalition, to share information, 'allow for strategic collaboration between members and relevant stakeholders' and to 'make collective diplomatic approaches.'[18] (We look at these aspects in 'Working Together', Section 3).

'Shining a spotlight' on violations related to abuses of media freedom and 'bringing them to the attention of the global public' as well as publicising the Coalition's own actions and those of partner agencies, partly through media attention, partly through conferences and in other multilateral fora, is another key strand of the Campaign. We analyse to what extent this has been successful in 'Shining a Spotlight' (see Section 4).

Finally, the Coalition has committed to 'provide assistance to journalists and to governments seeking to improve their domestic legislation' (covered in more detail under 'Developing and Defending the Media', see Section 5).[19] Specifically, various members of the Coalition support the new Global Media Defence Fund (GMDF) – a fund established separately to the Coalition by the UK and Canada.[20] This fund is led by UNESCO in support of the UN Plan on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.

Other stakeholders: structure, purpose, approach and activities to date

In parallel with the official governmental bodies, there are the following non- and inter-governmental entities involved with, advising on and taking part in the MFC:

1. The High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom is the independent advisory body of the Media Freedom Coalition. The High Level Panel was established in July 2018 at the request of the Coalition's inaugural Co-Chairs, Canada and the UK and is composed of experts in the field of international law.

The High Level Panel's remit is to provide legal advice and recommendations to the Coalition and its partners, including international organisations, for the purposes of promoting and protecting a vibrant, free, and independent media. The High Level Panel also provides individual States with legal advice in the form of legal opinions on draft legislation or legislation already in force, where media freedoms are engaged, as well as amicus curiae opinions at the request of a constitutional court or an international court in a media freedom case of general public importance.

The High Level Panel's Secretariat is the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute, providing it with operational, technical, and legal assistance.[21] The work of the High Level Panel is supported by the Global Media Defence Fund, administered by UNESCO. Its Chair is Lord Neuberger of Abbotsbury and its Deputy Chairs are Can Yeginsu and Catherine Amirfar. Amal Clooney was the

[17] '…in the event of a serious incident threatening media freedom occurring in a Coalition country, the wider group may seek a clarification from that country on the facts of the case. If the response is inadequate the Coalition may: - issue a statement of concern - take measures to have a country removed from the Coalition. (The Co-Chairs intend to write to all members of the Coalition seeking their views on membership, if two-thirds of the Coalition concur, membership is expected to be revoked).' Extract from point 5.9. of the Terms of Reference.

[18] Ibid; See Media Freedom Coalition website: https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/

[19] FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Ministerial meeting on media freedom concluding statement: a global responsibility, Gov.uk, September 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-ministerial-meeting-at-unga-2019-statement-on-global-responsibility/ministerial-meeting-on-media-freedom-concluding-statement-a-global-responsibility

[20] See Table 5 for details of funds donated.

[21] See IBAHRI website: https://www.ibanet.org/IBAHRIsecretariat

Panel's inaugural Deputy Chair and now serves as Special Advisor to the Chair; she was also Special Envoy on media freedom for the UK but resigned from this role in September 2020.[22]

So far, the High Level Panel has published four advisory reports, based on the '*rationale of protection and punishment'* that focus on improving international mechanisms to enforce international human rights norms.[23] The reports are directed at the members of the Coalition and have been accompanied by 'follow-up consultations and advocacy'.[24] Reports produced so far include:

1. **Report on the Use of Targeted Sanctions to Protect Journalists** – recommends the consistent use of targeted financial and travel sanctions as a tool to enforce compliance with international human rights law;

2. **Report on Providing Safe Refuge to Journalists at Risk** – the principal recommendation of the report calls for the introduction of a new emergency visa for journalists at risk;

3. **A Pressing Concern: Protecting and promoting press freedom by strengthening consular support to journalists at risk** – proposes a new paradigm of justice and accountability focused on providing minimum standards for consular support for journalists detained abroad; and

4. **Advice on Promoting More Effective Investigations into Abuses Against Journalists** – recommends strengthening investigations into attacks on journalists to address the issue of impunity and progress towards accountability, including the creation of a standing international Investigative Task Force.[25]

Each advisory report contains concrete recommendations to Coalition states, i.e. steps they can take to protect media freedoms in specific areas of their national and international legal relations. Additionally, six 'international standards' reports are forthcoming. These will focus on laws that are used/abused to target journalists around the world, including on misinformation and disinformation, sedition, national security laws, blasphemy, hate speech and internet shutdowns.

The High Level Panel also offers technical and legal assistance and advice to individual states. It has been asked for a formal Amicus Curiae Opinion by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights in a case engaging with media freedoms in Ecuador; and it has provided direct support and advice to States, for example reviewing two proposed bills on media reform in Zimbabwe.

2. The Consultative Network (MFC-CN) to the Coalition is made up of 17 media freedom organisations, with three co-chairs: ARTICLE19, IFEX and Pakistan Press Foundation.[26] Their roles and other expenses of the MFC-CN are covered via the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund.

The Network was created in January 2020 to represent civil society organisations, media groups, journalist's associations and media development actors' views in the discussions and interactions

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[22] Clooney resigned from the Special Envoy role in September 2020 in protest at the UK Government's plan to break international law with the Internal Market Bill following Brexit but she remained involved with the High Level Panel.
[23] Special Intervention by Amal Clooney, at Council of Europe's Conference of Ministers responsible for Media and Information Society (https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/media2021nicosia-recordings)
[24] Periodic Report 1 May-September 2020, High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, Periodic Report 1 May-September 2020, International Bar Association, https://www.ibanet.org/MediaHandler?id=EE35AE1F-64C8-4E79-9816-B4F19F0CE1C0
[25] The High Level Legal Panel's advisory Enforcement Reports can be found here: https://www.ibanet.org/IBAHRIsecretariat#reportscroll
[26] Media Freedom Coalition Advisory Network (MFC-AN) members (with names of representatives as of November 2020:
ARTICLE 19, Silvia Chocarro (Co-chair); Association for International Broadcasting, Thomas Wragg; Committee to Protect Journalists, Gypsy Guillen Kaiser; DW Akademie, Jan Lublinski; FLIP, Jonathan Bock; Frontline Freelance Register, Sarah Giaziri; IFEX, Rachael Kay (Co-chair); International Federation of Journalists, Jeremy Dear; International Media Support, Jesper Højberg; International Press Institute, Barbara Trionfi; Internews, Jodie Ginsberg; Pakistan Press Foundation, Owais Aslam Ali (Co-chair); Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms, Mousa Rimawi; Public Media Alliance, Sally-Ann Wilson; Reporters without Borders, Rebecca Vincent; The Guardian, Gill Phillips; and WAN-IFRA, Andrew Heslop.

with the MFC: approximately 50 organisations voted to select the 17 members of the MFC-CN and it has developed its own ToR, governance and methods of working.

The purpose of the CN is to 'provide advice on the work of the MFC and facilitate selection of cases that require diplomatic intervention'.[27] The Network has met regularly both internally and with the MFC member states and officials from the Co-Chairs (UK and Canada). It is the primary mechanism by which cases of media freedom violations are raised. Generally, the CN has met in private and been active behind the scenes, not only in scrutinising and recommending cases (including inside members states own jurisdictions), but also contributing ideas to the two main international conferences (2019 and 2020). It has also been lobbying for the Coalition to redouble its efforts in the face of pandemic, noting that 'Media freedom has never been more important given the COVID-19 pandemic, and the need for people to have access to accurate information and for moral leadership has never been as evident.'[28]

The CN has continually reminded the MFC states that promoting media freedom goes beyond ending the obvious acts of violence against journalists and must include a range of other issues such as tackling disinformation, committing to support media development and economic sustainability. The CN has also emphasised the need to address digital market failure and better regulation of digital platforms.[29]

It should be noted that this Network changed its name from 'advisory' to 'consultative' in 2021 as they felt it more accurately reflected their role with the MFC.

3. UNESCO is the UN's Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation based in Paris. UNESCO's manages the GMDF, out of its Communication and Information Sector. The GMDF is now in its second year of grant-making and is currently supporting 42 projects, mostly in developing countries, to the tune of USD $1.3 million (2021-22 funding cycle). UNESCO has long had the mandate to promote freedom of expression, within the UN system, so the GMDF sits alongside related UN initiatives which include the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) and the Sustainable Development Goal 16.10, which is the UN goal relating to freedom of expression.[30] In parallel, UNESCO has hosted the Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists since 2017, which implements the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity.[31] What differentiates the MFC from UN efforts is that it is formed by a separate and select group of member-countries who have formed the Coalition, distinct from the UN member states.

4. Other observers and evaluation mechanisms

- The UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee has scrutinised the UK's Global Campaign for Media Freedom and in September 2019 produced a report entitled *"Media Freedom is Under Attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty*.[32] The media freedom team from the UK's FCDO has responded to this report, with progress reports published in March 2020 and February 2021, defending and detailing its activities, including its work with the MFC.

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[27] Statement by the Media Freedom Coalition – Consultative (formerly Advisory) Network to the [2nd] Global Conference for Media Freedom Ministerial Meeting, Association for International Broadcasting, November 2020, https://aib.org.uk/media-freedom-coalition-advisory-network-statement-as-global-conference-opens/

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] The OHCHR has a Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (currently Irene Khan); SDG 16 Target 10: *Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements*, see here: https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16

[31] The plan is a set of objectives, principles and actions developed by UNESCO's member states and endorsed by the UN Chief Executives Board on 12 April 2012. See: UNESCO, UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, https://en.unesco.org/un-plan-action-safety-journalists

[32] Foreign Affairs Committee, "Media freedom is under attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty, House of Commons, September 2019, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1920/1920.pdf

- According to the ToR adopted in January 2020, every five years the Coalition 'is expected to conduct a comprehensive review of its objectives and purpose'.[33] It is not stated whether this will be an internal or independent review, who will conduct it, or whether it is due in either 2024 or 2025.

[33] See Point 6.4 of terms of reference, FCO and FCDO, Guidance: Media Freedom Coalition: terms of reference, Gov.uk, March 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference



Section 1. Promoting accountability for violations of media freedom



This objective is only partially met because the Media Freedom Coalition has not been bold or public enough with its joint statements about countries violating media freedom. However, there have been some successful examples of private diplomacy.

By signing the Global Pledge on Media Freedom, MFC member states committed to, 'ensuring that those who violate or abuse the human rights that underpin media freedom – be they governments or private entities – are held to account'.[34]

The MFC's principal mechanism for 'increasing the costs' to those who restrict media freedom has been to make public statements about specific cases and situations of concern, signed by multiple member states.[35] The purpose of these joint statements is to impose a 'diplomatic price' on those who violate media freedom by publicly condemning and stigmatising their actions.[36] As one official from a Coalition member state explained to us in an interview:

> *"Public statements are sometimes a very significant tool... because countries want to be respected internationally... Most countries care [about their reputations], and this is what this Coalition is meant to do; to work together to say these things publicly."*

[34] Media Freedom Coalition, Objectives, https://www.mediafreedomcoalition.org/about/objectives/coalition-objectives
[35] FCO and The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Media freedom and journalists under threat: Foreign Secretary's speech, Gov.uk, July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/media-freedom-and-journalists-under-threat-foreign-secretarys-speech
[36] Ibid.

The MFC has also sought to promote accountability by raising individual cases and situations privately.
In this section, we evaluate the MFC's efforts to promote accountability over the last two years, via its 'naming and shaming' and private diplomacy strategies. We begin by considering the volume and focus of the MFC's joint statements, the number of signatories each statement has received, and the potential impact of these statements. We then discuss the other diplomatic tools the members of the Coalition have used to seek to promote accountability for those who violate or abuse media freedom.

1.1. Volume of public statements

At the time of writing (January 2022), the MFC had published 22 joint statements since its first meeting of senior officials, in January 2020. This amounts to approximately one statement per month, over this two-year period.

Several of our interviewees argued that the MFC has published far too few collective statements, relative to the numbers of egregious violations of media freedom around the world. At time of writing, Reports without Borders reports 488 journalists are detained worldwide – a record number of journalists, and according to UNESCO 55 journalists and media workers were killed in 2021.[37] As a result, the CN has suggested many more cases of media freedom violations than have been taken up publicly by the MFC.

In response, officials within the MFC have argued that some cases are better dealt with privately rather than publicly. They also argue that it inevitably takes time to identify and reach agreement on situations of concern – especially as the MFC is a new initiative with a relatively large membership.[38]

However, officials also acknowledge that the MFC's activities were significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, which was declared only six weeks after the first meeting of the MFC's senior officials.[39] As a result, the MFC's *de facto* secretariat function – which has largely been assumed by the UK's FCDO – has generally been overstretched and underfunded.[40]

As well as reducing the number of joint cases which the MFC might otherwise have raised, these capacity issues have required members of the CN to devote a considerable amount of time to identifying and commenting on potential cases. As one member told us, "*It's exhausting. They flood us with requests for help, comment etc. We've spent hundreds of hours [working on this].*"

As a result, at the second MFC conference in November 2020, the CN reiterated that it wanted a more 'shared approach' and that it hoped 'to see more concrete action by the MFC in order to justify the time and effort that [CN] members currently devote to this initiative.'[41] Indeed, while it was originally intended that MFC members' embassies would help to identify relevant situations of concern, the great majority of the cases taken up by the MFC have been suggested by the CN.

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[37] Reporters without Borders, 2021 Round-Up, December 2021, https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/rsfroundup_2021.pdf; UNESCO, Journalist killings decline in 2021 but alarming threats remain, January 2022, https://en.unesco.org/news/journalist-killings-decline-2021-alarming-threats-remain

[38] One exception was the relative speed with which a statement on Belarus (Re. the arrest of Roman Protasevich on 23rd of May 2021) was issued: it was published on 28th May, just five days after the incident).

[39] The UK Government made this statement about the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the work of the MFC in 2020: "The need to redeploy staff to the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic led to an office wide reprioritisation of resources. Non-pandemic related work, including media freedom, was scaled back between March and July [2020] due to the unprecedented nature of the challenges facing the UK and FCO." UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/

[40] Several of the key officials who helped initiate the MFC were moved to the COVID response team within the (then) FCO at the start of the pandemic.

[41] ARTICLE19, Global Conference for Media Freedom, November 2020, https://www.article19.org/resources/global-conference-for-media-freedom-2020-csos-call-on-states-for-concrete-actions/

This frustration has been compounded by the opaque process for selecting cases within the MFC – making it unclear why some cases are taken up and others are not. Although a 'case management paper' was prepared by the MFC in 2020 to seek to tackle this issue, to our knowledge, no criteria have yet been formally agreed and feedback on cases proposed by the CN remains limited. The MFC does not, as far as we are aware, consult with its independent High Level Panel on this issue either.

This has left some members of the CN very frustrated with the MFC. One member of the CN, gave us this statement in November 2021:

> *"Civil society organisations have put a lot of time and effort into scrutinising and engaging with the MFC since its formation two years ago. We've had frustrations with how slowly some aspects have moved, and at times, a lack of response even on urgent case referrals. We've raised these issues directly with the MFC on a number of occasions and hope that things will improve in line with the commitment these states have made. If the MFC ultimately does not do what it set out to do, some difficult decisions may need to be made about continued engagement."*

1.2. Focus of public statements

Table 1: Joint statements published by the MFC (January 2020 to December 2021)

	Statement focus (date of publication)	Percentage of eligible members which signed the statement
1	Belarus (Sept 2020)*	100%
2	Mexico (Miroslava Breach case) (Oct 2020)*	100%
3	International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists 2020 (Nov 2020)	100%
4	World Press Freedom Day 2021 (May 2021)	100%
5	First MFC meeting (Feb 2020)	100%
6	One year anniversary of the first MFC Conference (July 2020) **	100%
7	2 year anniversary of the first MFC conference (July 2021)	98%
8	International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists 2021 (Nov 2021)	98%
9	Ministerial communiqué (from second MFC conference) (Nov 2020)	97%
10	COVID-19 (Apr 2020)*	75%
11	Yemen (June 2020)*	75%
12	Myanmar (Apr 2021)	67%
13	Egypt (Nov 2020)*	63%
14	World Press Freedom Day 2020 (May 2020)	60%
15	Belarus (arrest of Roman Protasevich) (June 2021)	60%
16	Belarus (Feb 2021)	51%
17	Crimea (Aug 2021)	47%
18	Hong Kong (July 2021)	45%
19	Uganda (Jan 2021)	43%
20	Russia (Oct 2021)	38%
21	China (Jan 2021)	33%
22	The Philippines (Jul 2020)	23%

** Only members of the MFC Executive Group were eligible to sign*
*** Only the 2 MFC Co-Chairs were eligible to sign (UK and Canada)*

Table 1 shows that, of the 22 joint statements published by the MFC, 12 (55 per cent) drew attention to specific media freedom violations related to individual countries and/or media workers. These 12 statements related to nine different countries, including Belarus (three times), China (twice, including in relation to Hong Kong), Russia (twice, including in relation to Crimea), Egypt, Myanmar, the Philippines, Uganda, Yemen, and Mexico.[42]

[42] It is worth noting, though, that the MFC statement on the Miroslava Breach case in Mexico (October 2020), 'welcome[d] the action taken by Mexican authorities', whereas all the other case-based statements expressed concern and/or condemned the authorities' actions.

The MFC's decisions over which specific cases to speak out on have been criticised for two main reasons. First, other than China, the MFC statements do not tend to target the countries that are lowest on the Reporters without Borders (RSF) media freedom ranking, such as Eritrea, North Korea, Turkmenistan, and Iran. Instead, they generally appear to have been issued in response to particularly problematic moments (for example, in the lead-up to the Ugandan elections of 14th January 2021) and high-profile cases affecting individual journalists (for example, Roman Protasevich's arrest after his flight was diverted to Minsk).

Second, there are other notable high-profile cases of abuses of media freedom which the MFC has not issued statements about. For example, early on, a UK Foreign Affairs Select Committee report criticised the UK – as Co-Chair of the MFC – for remaining silent on egregious cases of killings and 'severe reductions of media freedom' in Malta, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. They called on the UK Foreign Office to do more in public to shame perpetrators; 'including when those perpetrators are governments'. They expressed a concern that the FCDO's (then FCO's) preferred method is 'a firm word behind closed doors, especially when other UK interests are involved. The UK is seen, quite literally in some cases, as trading away its values.'[43]

The MFC has also not published a joint statement relating to Israel, even though an Israeli airstrike destroyed a prominent building in Gaza City that housed media outlets, in May 2021. As one NGO observer told us, '*when things get tricky [politically] the tendency is to sidestep.*'

Table 1 also shows that the MFC has made nine, more general joint statements related either to specific International Days, such as World Press Freedom Day, or to the anniversary of its first conference. Only one MFC statement – relating to COVID-19 (April 2020) – has focussed on a cross-cutting or broader issue affecting media freedom. There have been no statements made specifically about misinformation, the growing financial threats to media sustainability or the responsibilities of social media platforms, for example. However, these issues were mentioned in the ministerial communiqué published after the second MFC Conference and have been acknowledged briefly in other statements.

The MFC's joint statements have also had little to say about gradual and/or systemic abuses against media freedom allowed by some governments, such as media capture by business-interests close to autocracies, problematic laws (such as criminalisation of libel), restrictions on access to official information, and other punitive policies against journalism such as extortionate licence fees and vexatious and exhausting lawsuits (SLAPPs) against journalists.[44]

Some media freedom advocates argue that this gradual erosion of independent media is more pernicious than direct harassment of news outlets and critical journalists. In the words of Kate Musgrave, in a recent report for the Center for International Media Assistance: *"the gradual capture of the media environment… allow[s] the government to avoid international condemnation and keep up a façade of democracy and free expression."*[45]

[43] Foreign Affairs Committee, "Media freedom is under attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty, Parliament.uk, September 2019, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1920/192002.htm

[44] SLAPPs are strategic lawsuit against public participation (SLAPP), intended to censor, intimidate, and silence critics by burdening them with the cost of a legal defence until they abandon their criticism or opposition.

[45] Kate Musgrave, Tipping Point: Democratic Erosion and the Assault on Press Freedom, CIMA, October 2021, https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/tipping-point-democratic-erosion-and-the-assault-on-press-freedom/

1.3. Signatories of public statements

According to the MFC's ToR, statements made by the Coalition should, ideally, 'be made by consensus'.[46] However, Table 1 shows that this is rarely the case. Only six out of 22 statements (27 per cent) were signed by all eligible members. Even the ministerial communiqué from the second MFC conference (November 2020) and the statement made on the two-year anniversary of the first MFC conference (July 2021) were not signed by every MFC member.[47]

On average, MFC statements were signed by 72 per cent of eligible members. Statements relating to specific cases of violations of media freedom were signed, on average, by just 57 per cent of members.

However, it is important to note that – given the politically sensitive nature of such statements – it is unreasonable to expect a diverse inter-state coalition to achieve consensus in every case. For example, while only 15 out of 42 (36 per cent) eligible states signed the statement relating to media freedom in China (January 2021) this may still have been interpreted as a significant achievement for the Coalition.

Indeed, taking this – and the rapidly growing membership of the MFC – into account, it appears that the proportion of eligible MFC members signing joint statements is increasing. For instance, whereas only 23 per cent of eligible members signed the early statement on the Philippines (July 2020), 67 per cent signed the more recent statement on Myanmar (Apr 2021).

To encourage more members to sign each statement, the MFC Executive Group reported in February 2021 (via a statement to the UK Parliament by the UK FCDO), that they intended to:

> *"Agree a process of 'opt out' rather than 'opt in' to statements, and have a systematic approach to statements through an agreed case mechanism paper to speed up the process and encourage more countries to align to statements."*[48]

The opt-out process has since been implemented but is only used for general statements/non-country specific statements, such as statements marking international days.

Table 2 shows though that there were also significant differences in the proportion of eligible statements signed by different MFC members. Only five (ten per cent) MFC members have signed all possible statements. These include the UK, Germany, Latvia, the Netherlands and New Zealand (although New Zealand only joined the MFC in March 2021). Canada (95 per cent) did not sign the MFC statement on Crimea. The US (90 per cent) did not sign the statements on the Philippines and Egypt.

Despite being members of the MFC Executive Group, both Ghana and the Maldives have only signed 38 per cent of statements. By contrast, despite not being members of the MFC Executive group (prior to 2022), the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia and France all signed 94 per cent of statements.

The least active members of the MFC – in terms of supporting joint statements – have been Spain (27 per cent) and Belize (27 per cent). Both signed fewer statements than Afghanistan (31 per cent). Argentina and Lebanon also signed less than a third (31 per cent) of all eligible statement. Although

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[46] Point 5.7 of the TORs reads: *5.7 Statements made by the Coalition should be made by consensus or, if consensus cannot be achieved, for example if the statement is regarding a case or situation of concern in a Coalition member state, be open to signature by association by smaller groups of members, issued by the co-Chairs on members' behalf.*

[47] Aya Majzoub, Why Won't Lebanon Stand Up for Free Expression?, Human Rights Watch, November 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/11/23/why-wont-lebanon-stand-free-expression

[48] UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/

Botswana co-hosted the 2nd Global Conference on Media Freedom, they have only signed one third of eligible statements to date. Overall, 19 out of 49 MFC members (39 per cent) signed fewer than half of eligible statements.

Table 2: Percentage of MFC joint statements signed by each member

MFC member state (date joined if not an original member)	Percentage of eligible statement signed	MFC member state cont.	Percentage cont.
UK (outgoing Co-Chair)	100%	North Macedonia	63%
Germany (Executive group member)	100%	Italy (Dec 2020)	55%
Latvia (Executive group member)	100%	Cyprus (Aug 2020)	54%
Netherlands (Co-Chair and Executive group member)	100%	Chile (Feb 2021)	50%
New Zealand (Mar 2021)	100%	Sierra Leone (July 2021)	50%
Canada (Co-Chair)	95%	Guyana (Aug 2021)	50%
Czech Republic	94%	Honduras	44%
Denmark	94%	Montenegro	44%
Estonia	94%	Uruguay	44%
France	94%	Republic of Korea (Jan	44%
US (Executive group	90%	Croatia (Apr 2021)	43%
Iceland	88%	Ghana (Executive group member)	38%
Lithuania	88%	Maldives (Executive group member)	38%
Luxembourg	88%	Kosovo	38%
Slovenia	88%	Serbia	38%
Switzerland	88%	Seychelles	38%
Slovakia (Feb 2020)	88%	Sudan (Feb 2020)	38%
Austria	81%	Portugal (Mar 2021)	38%
Finland	81%	Botswana (Nov 2020)	33%
Bulgaria	75%	Argentina	31%
Ukraine	75%	Lebanon	31%
Costa Rica	69%	Afghanistan (Feb 2020)	31%
Greece	69%	Belize (Nov 2020)	27%
Japan (Aug 2020)	69%	Spain (Dec 2020)	27%
Australia (Nov 2020)	64%	Ireland (Dec 2021)	n/a

1.4. The potential impact of the MFC's public statements

It is difficult to establish what impact, if any, the MFC's joint statements have had, without interviewing senior officials from the countries targeted. However, none of the legal, human rights and media freedom groups we spoke to said they knew of any individual cases named in the MFC's statements that had been satisfactorily resolved.

Despite this, there is evidence to suggest that the MFC's statements may have contributed to broader international and diplomatic efforts to highlight media freedom issues. For example, the MFC statement about media freedom in the Philippines (July 2020) was, described by one UK official as having helped to *"nudge the dial a little"* within the country.[49] Specifically, they said it was used by diplomats as a, *"hook to raise media freedom issues in their backchannel conversations [with the government] and it was picked up by a few journalists locally."*

This was one small part of a wider international effort to hold the Duterte government to account for violations of media freedom, which has culminated in the 2021 Nobel Prize being awarded to Maria Ressa, alongside the Russian journalist, Dmitry Muratov. As Julie Posetti (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism) noted:

> *"The international community's support for... [Maria Ressa] and for her capacity to do independent journalism under threat is something that was very meaningful and allowed the organisation Rappler to continue to operate with a sense of being shielded."*[50]

Furthermore, joint statements from multiple governments can contribute – not just to tackling specific cases or supporting individual journalists and media workers – but also to strengthening the norm of media freedom in general. In this respect, one respondent described the MFC as being *"designed to shift the incentives and norms of the international rules-based order"* – and suggested that its joint statements were an important mechanism for achieving this.

However, for this strategy to be effective, it is important that the MFC's statements are well publicised. As discussed in Section 4 of this report, this has not been the case. Almost all the MFC's statements, with the possible exception of the statement on Hong Kong (July 2021), have received very little news coverage or attention on social media. The MFC's early statement on Yemen (June 2020), for example, was mentioned in just 14 Tweets and eight news items (online, in English).[51]

Multiple interviewees repeatedly expressed their frustration about this lack of visibility. For example, a representative of one CN member told us that *"a statement that nobody sees has no impact."* Another described the UK and Canada as having been *"very bad editorially and very bad at public relations."*

However, one official from a Coalition member state qualified this critique, suggesting that *"it doesn't matter if these MFC statements don't get much coverage because the target audience is the state, not the public or the media."*

[49] Media Freedom Coalition, Statement by Media Freedom Coalition on situation in the Philippines, July 2020, https://www.mediafreedomcoalition.org/activities/joint-statements/2020/statement-by-media-freedom-coalition-on-situation-in-the-philippines
[50] Foreign Affairs Committee Oral evidence: The FCO and global media freedom, HC 1920 Tuesday 7 May 2019
[51] Scott, M., Bunce, M. and Myers, M. (2020). Shining a Spotlight on Media Freedom: Media Coverage of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom. London, UK: pressfreedom.co.uk

1.5. Private diplomacy

We have limited information about the impact of the MFC's private diplomacy, precisely because it is discreet. However, based on interviews with diplomats in MFC member nations, there is evidence to suggest that there has been a slightly increased focus on media freedom than before the Coalition was formed.

For instance, one embassy official in a country targeted by the MFC told us that "*there's always a lot going on here in the media freedom space"* but without the MFC, the embassy would "*not have led so much on it here and made as many public statements"*. In another case, the owner of a large media group was released from jail after the MFC privately took up this case, along with their embassies.

Much of this private diplomacy has taken the form of hosting and convening meetings to keep dialogue open and to demonstrate international support to journalists under threat. A UK Ambassador told us:

> *"What has struck me is just how much journalists value events at the residence. They felt that we were creating a safe space and we were saying 'we have your back'. We heard that time and time again, quite how valuable that was to journalists here, just as an end in itself."*[52]

Similarly, in Ghana, one NGO representative spoke of their delight at the seniority of Canadian staff engaged with media freedom activities:

> *"At the national level we have an ongoing process to develop a safety of journalist framework in Ghana, and the Canadian High Commission has been quite deeply involved. I was quite amazed that at one of the forums we held around it, the High Commissioner herself was there to make a statement and support it, so I think this indicates that this is not just by word but* in deeds *they [MFC Executive Group] are truly committed to acting on it."*

Other examples we have identified come mainly from UK's FCDO and include the following instances of public convening around media freedom from 2020:[53]

- The UK Embassy in Sudan took on the role of the international community's Media Reform Working Group Coordinator in Khartoum, Sudan.
- The UK and six other Ambassadors delivered a joint digital media campaign in Bangladesh on upholding press independence and freedom of expression.
- Lord Ahmad, UK Minister of State Foreign Commonwealth & Development Affairs, hosted a media freedom roundtable featuring prominent journalists and civil society representatives during his virtual visit to Pakistan in September 2020.
- The UK High Commissioner in Nairobi, Kenya hosted a group of recently sacked journalists to show support.

More private approaches and 'conversations' include the following examples:

- Dominic Raab, then UK Foreign Secretary, requested the lifting of the block on the BBC Vietnamese service and the easing of visas for international journalists to report in Vietnam during his trip to Hanoi in September 2020.[54]

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[52] Interview, 15th November 2021.
[53] Gathered mainly from the UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/
[54] UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/

- In Malta several Coalition states continue to push for accountability for the murder (in 2017) of Daphne Caruana Galizia. For example, the UK reported that its High Commissioner to Valletta met with Prime Minister Abela to discuss rule of law issues and High Commission officials continue to observe the public inquiry (30th October 2020).[55]
- Also in Malta, one country in the Coalition has had meetings with the Maltese Foreign Minister to support Malta's application to join the Coalition on condition that it shows commitment to media freedom.[56]
- In Saudi Arabia, concerning the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, the UK (among other countries) reports that it continues to 'call for justice': one example being in 2020, then UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab apparently *"raised the case directly with the Saudi Government during his visit in March 2020 and in July the [UK] Government sanctioned 20 Saudi nationals involved in the murder under our new Global Human Rights regime."*[57] However, another private conversation between the UK and Saudi Arabia appeared to undermine this progress when the UK's Defence Secretary, Ben Wallace, purportedly apologised for the sanctions to his Saudi counterpart later.[58]

It is difficult to know if these instances of private diplomacy would have happened without the MFC. However, many of our interviewees described some of the most significant impacts of the MFC as stemming from these off the record conversations.

The Coalition has recently decided to prioritise its diplomatic efforts in 11 countries (though more countries can be added if MFC members decide to focus on them). We understand that these are countries in which the embassies of MFC member states will be particularly active on media freedom issues – probably lobbying privately rather than publicly, in the main. This may help focus the diplomatic work. There has been a toolkit on media freedom developed for use by officials in some embassies – we have had confirmation of the UK and Canada using these toolkits so far. Nevertheless, the challenge will always remain that diplomatic missions are over-stretched in terms of staff time, even where media freedom is given special priority – which is rare, in itself.

1.6. Sanctions

A final key mechanism for holding states accountable for abuses of media freedom is the use of sanctions (although sanctions can only be imposed by member states – individually or working in tandem – rather than by the Coalition itself).

The first report by the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, published in February 2020, explained how targeted sanctions could be used as a tool to enforce compliance with international human rights law, including the right to a free press.[59] The report, authored by Amal Clooney, the then Deputy Chair of the High Level Panel, concludes with 11 recommendations for designing and implementing global human rights sanctions regimes to better protect journalists around the world.

Since then, various members of the MFC have adopted Magnitsky-style Human Rights sanctions regimes. The UK's Human Rights sanctions regime, for example, which came into effect on 6th July 2021, allows for the imposition of asset freezes and travel bans. In fact, 20 Saudi nationals believed

[55] UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/Ibid.
[56] Interview, 28th July 2021,
[57] UK Government Response to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee report "Media Freedom is Under Attack", February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/
[58] Jessica Ní Mhainín, 'The UK and Media Freedom: An urgent need to lead by example' in Susan Coughtrie, Unsafe for Scrutiny: How the misuse of the UK's financial and legal systems to facilitate corruption undermines the freedom and safety of investigative journalists around the world, FPC, December 2020, p.49-53, https://fpc.org.uk/publications/unsafe-for-scrutiny-12-2020-publication/
[59] Amal Clooney, Report on the Use of Targeted Sanctions to Protect Journalists, International Bar Association, February 2020, https://www.ibanet.org/Media-Freedom-Sanctions-report-launch-2020

to have been involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi were among the first people to be sanctioned by the UK using this new legislation. In response to the announcement, the Chair of the High Level Panel, Lord Neuberger, and the then Deputy Chair, Amal Clooney, welcomed these sanctions but noted that

> *"…the bases for designations that have been announced today are not as broad as they could be under the Sanctions Act. We hope that in the near future the scope of the regime will be broadened in line with our recommendations, and that additional designations will be announced to respond to serious abuses of human rights being perpetrated around the world."*[60]

Since the UK's Global Human Rights Sanctions regime was adopted, the UK has held a number of roundtables on the subject, for civil society, where key press freedom organisations have asked why recommendations from the High Level Panel's report have not been taken forward to broaden the Global Human Rights Sanctions Regime. The response has been that broadening the regime was not the focus of the UK at the present time.

Several other members of the MFC are also currently considering implementing similar sanctions regimes and have been encouraged to do so by the Coalition.[61] The High Level Panel has also advised countries to consider passing Magnitsky-style legislation and the Panel's report helps to provide the justification and means for doing so. For example, in May 2020, the High Level Panel addressed an Australian Parliamentary Committee considering the creation of a targeted sanctions regime to address global human rights abuses.[62] In December 2021, the Australian Parliament expanded its autonomous sanctions laws to enable the establishment of Magnitsky-style sanctions.[63]

The adoption of new sanctions regimes by members of the MFC appears to have largely coincided with, rather than been caused by, the actions of the MFC. One senior official from the UK expressed this as a parallel process:

> *"In 2019... Jeremy Hunt focused in on media freedom as an agenda, and we said, 'One of the things that we can do is use the emerging sanctions legislation to focus on human rights abusers including those who kill journalists.' … So, we took the two things forward in parallel with the result being that the legislation that we will bring forward now will be broader than just media freedom."*

Nevertheless, the use of targeted sanctions increasingly represents one of the most important ways that a growing number of MFC members could 'increase the costs' to those who restrict media freedom in future.[64]

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[60] Statement from Lord Neuberger and Amal Clooney on the UK global human rights sanctions regime, https://www.ibanet.org/article/8CDFC7B4-469C-4342-80DD-C2F0F3305FCC

[61] *'We called on members of the Media Freedom Coalition to consider… adopting and applying targeted sanctions against known perpetrators of human rights violations and abuses in response to the repression of journalists and restrictions on media freedom'* from Global Affairs Canada, Media Freedom Coalition ministerial communiqué, November 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/11/media-freedom-coalition-ministerial-communique.html

[62] Ben Smee, Amal Clooney urges Australia to pass Magnitsky law to help protect global human rights, The Guardian, May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/15/amal-clooney-urges-australia-to-pass-magnitsky-law-to-help-protect-global-human-rights; High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, Periodic Report 1: May-September 2020, IBA, https://www.ibanet.org/MediaHandler?id=EE35AE1F-64C8-4E79-9816-B4F19F0CE1C0

[63] Senator the Hon Marise Payne, Strengthening Australia's sanctions regime, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Australia, December 2021, https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/minister/marise-payne/media-release/strengthening-australias-sanctions-regime; Ben Smee, Amal Clooney urges Australia to pass Magnitsky law to help protect global human rights, The Guardian, May 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/may/15/amal-clooney-urges-australia-to-pass-magnitsky-law-to-help-protect-global-human-rights

[64] FCO and The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, Media freedom and journalists under threat: Foreign Secretary's speech, Gov.uk, July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/media-freedom-and-journalists-under-threat-foreign-secretarys-speech



Section 2. Creating Internal Accountability

RED

Achievements in this area have been poor because members within the Coalition have not been publicly held to account or excluded by their peers when they have violated media freedoms. Core members of the Coalition are not leading sufficiently by example, by adopting recommendations for change 'at home'.

Members of the MFC have pledged to improve media freedom 'at home as well as abroad'.[65] In this section we analyse whether the MFC has held its own members to account and what efforts are being made to create a Coalition-wide network to support these efforts.

2.1. Holding each other to account?

There is provision within the MFC's ToR for all members of the Coalition to be 'open to scrutiny of the media freedom situation in their country'. As Can Yeginsu, Co-Chair of the High Level Panel, has noted:

> *"If democracies are to fight the spread of truth decay, they will need to work together in coalition, and do more than reaffirm their existing commitments to media freedom in speeches or expressions of concern. They must set an example to the world through their actions".*[66]

[65] FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Statement by the Media Freedom Coalition on its first meeting, Gov.uk, February 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-january-2020-meeting-statement/statement-by-the-media-freedom-coalition-on-its-first-meeting

[66] Can Yeginsu, "How to Fight Truth Decay: Protect the Truth Tellers", Just Security, November 2020, https://www.justsecurity.org/73497/how-to-fight-truth-decay-protect-the-truth-tellers/

However, observers have criticised the lack of accountability within the Coalition.[67]

In the first two years, there has not been a single example of the MFC publicly calling out one of its own members. This is despite the fact that many political observers and CN members believe there are cases among member states worth raising.

The CN have suggested several member nations that should be investigated or condemned for their media freedom violations. These include: Afghanistan, Croatia, Slovenia, Sudan and the US.

The case of the US was raised during a debate about media freedom in the UK House of Lords in (8th June 2020). During that debate Lord Black, deputy chairman of the Telegraph Media Group, described the MFC as *"missing in action"*, saying:

> *"Across the world – from Mexico to Hungary to Beijing – attacks on journalists and publishers are reaching unprecedented levels. In many cases these are inspired by the disgraceful actions of the White House which have led to attacks on journalists in the US."*[68]

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon responded to this by denying that the MFC was 'missing in action', arguing that *"the issue had been raised in bilateral conversations with the US".*[69]

There have been several other members where obvious instances of media violations have occurred, for example in Sudan and Afghanistan – as a result of change of government since joining the Coalition. In Sudan (as detailed in our case study in the annexes) journalists have been imprisoned and threatened following the coup in October 2021. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's repression of independent media following their takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 is well known.[70] However, the MFC has so far made no public statements about members experiencing democratic backsliding, or indicated publicly that the membership of such countries is privately under review (which we understand is in fact currently the case for Afghanistan).[71]

Croatia is another case in point. There are currently scores of lawsuits against journalists in Croatia which amount to threats aimed at silencing journalists, often referred to as SLAPPs.[72] This has been raised by the Index on Censorship and other campaigning groups, for example in written submissions to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee report on media freedom (201), but the MFC has not publicly condemned Croatia on this issue.

A further example is Slovenia. In early 2020, investigative journalist Blaž Zgaga was targeted by a hate campaign fuelled by the Government and a pro-government TV station for investigating the Government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis.[73] This appears to be part of a wider pattern of using

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[67] For example, Joel Simon in the Guardian wrote: "the coalition has not been sufficiently outspoken in the face of ongoing violations committed by governments, including some of its own members." Joel Simon, In the battle between truth and lies, we must protect the world's journalists, The Guardian, December 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/11/truth-lies-journalists-nobel-prize-prison

[68] Society of Editors, SoE urges the government to turn words into action to support press freedom, June 2020, https://www.societyofeditors.org/soe_news/soe-urges-the-government-to-turn-words-into-action/

[69] Ibid.

[70] See for example: Kim Willsher, Taliban's Return 'a catastrophe' for journalism in Afghanistan, The Guardian, September 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/sep/14/talibans-return-a-catastrophe-for-journalism-in-afghanistan

[71] We understand that there is currently a *de facto* suspension of Afghanistan in the sense that it is no longer invited to any of the MFC meetings or events (such as the Ministerial Meeting in Estonia in February 2022)

[72] "Even if the prospects of success may be non-existent a wealthy litigant can silence a journalist or media outlet through the threat of months or years of high legal costs of responding. Such lawsuits are sometimes referred to as "SLAPP" (Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation) suits, from their use in the United States against campaigning groups." (Index on Censorship, submission to Foreign Affairs Committee, written evidence, 3 May 2019)

[73] International Press Institute, "Media freedom violations in the EU under COVID-19", April 2020 https://ipi.media/media-freedom-violations-in-the-eu-under-covid-19/

the COVID-19 pandemic to discourage the free expression of dissent or political opposition. This has been condemned by the Council of Europe's Commissioner of Human Rights.[74]

There has been no public issuance from the Coalition about Slovenia. A source at the FCDO said that as Co-Chairs of the MFC, the UK and Canada 'have written privately to members of the MFC', also Posts (embassies) in country 'have reached out to governments'. Internal accountability within the MFC is, therefore, limited to private conversations.

The CN are critical of this situation. Indeed, one member of the CN described the MFC as, *"very ineffective at holding its own members to account, so far".* Given this, the CN has asked the MFC for a commitment that any cases they bring forward relating to an MFC member country be shared with the entire MFC list.

2.2. Leading by example: are the core members protecting media freedom at home?

Several MFC member states made verbal commitments to positive internal change at the Global Media Freedom Conferences in 2019 and 2020.

In several cases, this was a reaffirmation of what states were already doing.[75] Furthermore, many of our interviewees pointed out that the UK, Canada, the US and other members of the Executive Group have a number of media freedom issues to improve on at home, particularly the way they treat journalists.

For example, in July 2020, there was a debate held in the UK's House of Lords that highlighted the barring of some journalists attending government briefings in the UK. During that debate, Ian Murray, executive director of the Society of Editors, said: *"actions begin at home with ensuring threats to the media here in the UK are removed. We must be seen to set the example we expect other nations to emulate."*[76]

Jessica Ní Mhainín from Index on Censorship argues that the UK Government has repeatedly undermined its MFC pledge at home, by, for example, denying several journalists access to government briefings, blacklisting an investigative news outlet, and through the ongoing detention of Julian Assange.[77] Another charge against the UK is that it is harbouring a legal industry that 'profits from the intimidation of journalists and suppression of information' by helping to impose SLAPPs and other vexatious lawsuits against journalists.[78] As the Foreign Policy Centre has documented, the scale of these vexatious lawsuits is increasing and is supported by 'a London-based industry aimed at

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[74] "The Commissioner regrets that the Slovenian government appears to have used the COVID-19 pandemic to discourage the free expression of dissent or political opposition. Several measures restricting the right to protest, including prolonged blanket bans on public assemblies and heavy fines imposed on protestors, seem disproportionate and risk undermining freedom of expression. While being mindful of the authorities' responsibility to protect public health, the Commissioner recommends that the authorities find the proper balance in order to uphold the right to freedom of peaceful assembly" – from Council of Europe Memorandum "Slovenian authorities should halt the deterioration of freedom of expression and media freedom", published 4th June 2021

[75] For example, the UK's National Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists (detailed below) was an idea which originated as part of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity back in 2012.

[76] Society of Editors, SoE urges the government to turn words into action to support press freedom", June 2020, https://www.societyofeditors.org/soe_news/soe-urges-the-government-to-turn-words-into-action/

[77] Jessica Ní Mhainín, in Foreign Policy Centre, Unsafe for Scrutiny: How the misuse of the UK's financial and legal systems to facilitate corruption undermines the freedom and safety of investigative journalists around the world, December 2020, https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Unsafe-for-Scrutiny-December-2020-publication.pdf. Index on Censorship has also raised the following issues as regards the UK: Home Office refusals of visas for journalists invited to the UK to speak at events, receive awards and take up training opportunities are a significant problem; incidents such as the widely-condemned arrests of Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey in August 2018 in connection with alleged theft of documents from the office of the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI) impact the FCO's ability to promote global media freedom; the government's failure to safeguard media freedom in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 drew international concerns; proposals in the Online Harms White Paper released in April 2019 have raised widespread concerns about impacts on media freedom. (Written evidence submitted by Index on Censorship to the Foreign Affairs Committee, UK Parliament,3rd May 2019)

[78] Jessica Ní Mhainín, Ibid.

silencing investigative journalism'.[79] The US could be similarly criticised as a centre for the facilitation of illicit financial flows, but has taken a much more notable stance since the start of the Biden administration to recognise the connection between corruption and national security as well as the connection to SLAPPs. In December 2021, the US included protecting journalists from SLAPPs as part of its new Anti-Corruption Strategy and announced the launch of a Global Defamation Fund, to help media fight back against vexatious lawsuits.[80]

In addition, and notably, Amal Clooney resigned from her role as Special Envoy on Media Freedom in September 2020 (but continued as Deputy Chair of the High Level Panel until the end of her term in 2021). Although Clooney's resignation was not for reasons directly due to issues related to media freedom – it is significant because her resignation letter lamented the loss of the UK's reputation as a champion of the international legal order, saying:

> *"Very sadly, it has now become untenable for me, as special envoy, to urge other states to respect and enforce international obligations while the UK declares that it does not intend to do so itself."*[81]

Canada has also been criticised by human rights groups for its practices relating to media coverage of indigenous rights and land disputes. Despite a court ruling in 2019 stipulating that special considerations should be granted to journalists reporting on these issues, federal authorities pressed charges against three members of the media in 2020.[82] Global Affairs Canada has also been criticised for giving approval for a Canadian company to sell and export mobile phone spy equipment to the Bangladeshi Government which can be used to identify and locate phones – a technology that is said to pose a threat to journalists.[83]

An analysis of changes over time in the RSF World Press Freedom Index rankings reveals that there is room for improvement across most Coalition members. The 2021 RSF rankings showed that six MFC states had improved rankings, 13 states retained their rankings from 2020, and 18 states experienced declines. The Seychelles rose an impressive 11 places, and the Maldives rose seven places. The biggest decline was in Kosovo, which dropped eight places, and Argentina, Greece and Lebanon all dropped five places. Only seven of the 47 MFC states had 'good' press freedom situations, at the time the RSF rankings were published (Finland, Denmark, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, and Switzerland).

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[79] FPC's Unsafe for Scrutiny report outlines how the facilitation of financial crime and corruption, in particular, through the UK's financial and legal systems, can also undermine the safety and security of journalists and media freedom around the world. Foreign Policy Centre, Unsafe for Scrutiny: How the misuse of the UK's financial and legal systems to facilitate corruption undermines the freedom and safety of investigative journalists around the world, December 2020, https://fpc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Unsafe-for-Scrutiny-December-2020-publication.pdf

[80] The White House, United States Strategy on Countering Corruption, December 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Strategy-on-Countering-Corruption.pdf; Janet L. Yellen and Samantha Power, "To uphold democracy, the U.S. must fight global corruption", The Washington Post, December 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/12/06/janet-yellen-samantha-power-democracy-fight-global-corruption/

[81] Owen Bowcott and Daniel Boffey, Amal Clooney quits UK envoy role over 'lamentable' Brexit bill, The Guardian, September 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/amal-clooney-quits-uk-envoy-role-over-lamentable-brexit-bill

[82] Reporters without Borders, Canada, https://rsf.org/en/canada

[83] Edin Omanovic and Siena Anstis, Canada's commitment to media freedom must be matched by action, The Globe and Mail, April 2021, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canadas-commitment-to-media-freedom-must-be-matched-by-action/

A final notable area of 'action at home' is the establishment of National Action Plans (NAPs) for the safety of journalists.[84] However, commitments by countries to NAPs are not directly connected to the MFC because they pre-date it. Nevertheless, starting such a plan has been cited as an example of positive achievement associated with Coalition membership.[85]

The UK Government published its first NAP in March 2021.[86] UK officials in the MFC have pointed to this as 'leading by example' and argued that the UK's NAP 'draws inspiration' from the MFC (among other international efforts).[87] While there has been some criticism, many observers and NGO representatives have welcomed this development. One media freedom activist we spoke to described the UK's NAP as *"part of the same movement as the MFC"* and thought it was a mark of success that the UK was *"moving forward"* with it and that this was a *"positive sign"*, even though it was still *"early days"*.

[84] The idea of drawing up National Action Plans originated as part of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity in 2012. They were also recommended by the Council of Europe in 2016 (see 'Taking Action to Protect Journalists and other Media Actions', Council of Europe, 2020, https://rm.coe.int/cyprus-2020-safety-of-journalists/168097fa83). Such plans usually involve strengthening domestic legal provisions to support the right to freedom of expression and information. See: UNESCO, UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, https://en.unesco.org/un-plan-action-safety-journalists; Sweden has published a NPA, see: https://www.government.se/information-material/2018/05/action-plan-defending-free-speech/; The Netherlands started drawing up action plans on the safety of journalists in 2018 (see: Peter Noorlander, "Taking Action to Protect Journalists and other Media Actions", Council of Europe, May 2020, https://rm.coe.int/cyprus-2020-safety-of-journalists/168097fa83) and has created a 'multi-stakeholder mechanism', see: https://www.persveilig.nl/; Also, in Nepal, there has been an agreement between UNESCO and the national HR commission to lead this work. The Philippines has also published a journalist safety NAP, under the Duterte administration, the first national plan in the world that purported to localise the 2012 UN Plan. But our case study details how independent journalists and local media freedom groups in the Philippines have condemned their government's narrative that "media safety can be boiled down to corruption and unprofessionalism in media is a deflection, or even a distortion, of realities on the ground." Meanwhile, the first actions to implement the UN Plan were in Pakistan, although there is no NAP *per se*.

[85] In the Coalition's Global Pledge it states: "We will encourage efforts by the UN and other organisations to establish a Task Force dedicated to the purpose [of creating national frameworks and action plans to implement the UN Plan of Action..]".

[86] Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Office, Guidance: National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, Gov.uk, March 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists

[87] Kanbar Hussein Bor, FCDO at the World Press Freedom Day, 29th April 2021, UNESCO, panel by the Media Freedom Coalition: 'The Role of Governments in Protecting Media Freedom: What More can the Media Freedom Coalition Do?'; Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Office, Guidance: National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, Gov.uk, March 2021, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists/national-action-plan-for-the-safety-of-journalists



Section 3. Working Together

GREEN/ AMBER

Despite the enormous challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the MFC has successfully worked together, shared information and convened a relatively large group of like-minded states. Membership of the Coalition has prompted positive change by a handful of states. However, collaboration with the CN and the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom could still be improved.

The international response to threats to media freedom has historically been very fragmented.[88] One of the MFC's goals is to provide greater coordination among like-minded countries to 'work together in taking action to improve the media freedom environment and the safety of journalists both at home and abroad.'[89] This section evaluates the extent to which the Coalition is meeting this objective and considers what has been achieved in terms of attracting members and sharing information. We also analyse how the MFC has been managed and resourced internally, and the relationship between the Coalition of states and other stakeholders.

3.1. Convening and expanding the group

Initially, much of the MFC's internal activity consisted of following up from the first conference in July 2019, persuading other states to join the Coalition and, ideally, contribute to the Global Media Defence Fund. Individual diplomats from the UK and Canada were central to this effort – most notably Alastair King-Smith (Coordinator of the Media Freedom team for the FCDO in the UK) and his Canadian counterpart, Catherine Godin. In addition to the eight members of the Executive Group, 24 more countries signed the Global Pledge on Media Freedom in September 2019 and the Coalition

[88] Image by FCDO under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/)
[89] See Media Freedom Coalition website: https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/

grew relatively quickly after this, with ten more joining in 2020. However, the pace has somewhat slowed during 2021 with eight having joined in 2021.[90]

Another key activity in the MFC's first two years has been bringing members together at regular intervals to help consolidate the coalition. These meetings have been restricted by the COVID-19 pandemic but there has been one major virtual gathering since the London launch in 2019 – the 2nd Global Conference hosted by Canada on 16th November 2020. The MFC also hosted a panel at the World Press Freedom Conference on 9-10th December 2020, co-hosted by The Netherlands and UNESCO.

At the 2nd Global Conference, the Canada-UK Media Freedom Award was announced.[91] This award 'recognises the journalists, individuals and organisations that actively promote and protect media freedom'.[92] Over 60 nominations were received and the winner in 2020 was the Belarusian Association of Journalists, 'the only independent journalists' union in the country' according to the Government of Canada's news release.[93]

There have also been regular internal meetings over the last two years – again mostly online. We understand that the Co-Chairs (UK and Canada officials) have been meeting every week, the Senior Offices of the Executive Group meet every quarter, the senior officials of the whole Media Freedom Coalition meet every six months, and every year there is meant to be a Ministerial Meeting (though timings have been slightly de-railed by the COVID-19 pandemic).[94] Since 2019, the International Bar Association's Human Rights Institute (IBAHRI) Secretariat have, on behalf of the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, attended quarterly Executive Group meetings and all Senior Officials meetings. The IBAHRI Secretariat have also had regular meetings with Co-Chairs Canada and UK, with the leadership of the High Level Panel also engaging directly with the Co-Chairs on its advisory reports. In addition, there have been regular meetings in 2021 (roughly every month) between the MFC-CN and the Co-Chairs.

Many observers regard it as a mark of success that 50 countries have so far signed up. One official from the Executive Group said: *"membership is growing fast and steady, actually. That shows that there is interest. That shows that this topic is the right one."*

This interviewee added that the MFC was less *"niche"* than other inter-state groupings such as the Freedom Online Coalition and the Religious Freedom Alliance, which have attracted fewer members.[95]

Other observers from the NGO and human rights community agree. For example, one respondent from a UK-based think-tank said: *"The UK is still looked upon as an agenda setting country – they've got a lot of countries to sign up which is great. They've done maybe the hardest bit which is getting countries to sign up."*

[90] See Table 1 in 'Public Accountability' section.
[91] It is not clear whether this will become an annual award or was a one-off. Press releases at the time of the award announcement spoke of 'the first' award, implying this will become a yearly prize. However, there does not appear to be any mention of an annual award on the Media Freedom Coalition Website (See Media Freedom Coalition website: https://www.mediafreedomcoalition.org/)
[92] UK Government response to the Foreign Affairs Committee report, February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/
[93] Global Affairs Canada, Canada and United Kingdom announce recipient of first Media Freedom Award, Government of Canada, November 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/11/canada-and-united-kingdom-announce-recipient-of-first-media-freedom-award.html
[94] There were Ministerial Meeting at the first and second Global Conferences in 2019 London, 2020 Quebec (virtual), and one is planned for the third Global Conference in Estonia (dubbed '2021' but rescheduled to early 2022).
[95] The Freedom Online Coalition currently has 34 member governments and the International Religious Freedom of Belief Alliance has 33.

Joel Simon, Executive Director of the Committee to Protect Journalists, opined: *"…the Media Freedom Coalition … has now signed up 49 governments to its global pledge on media freedom. That commitment matters…"*[96]

Furthermore, the organisers of the Coalition, notably the UK's FCDO, have adopted a multi-stakeholder approach, especially in the run up to the launch of the MFC and for the first Conference in 2019. There were at least 50 media-related NGOs and civil society organisations (CSOs), invited to consultations with the UK Foreign Office in the first half of 2019. This included both UK-based NGOs including the National Union of Journalists and BBC Media Action and international ones including the Global Forum for Media Development, Free Press Unlimited (Netherlands), and International Media Support (Denmark).

The non-governmental groups we talked to were generally enthusiastic about being involved, although they did – and still do – have criticisms regarding the organisation of the first 2019 Conference in London and other aspects of the MFC (see 'Shining a Spotlight', Section 4).

Officials from the FCDO acknowledged that wide consultation had many pros but also cons, including potentially conflicting viewpoints: *"[When planning the Conference] we did an extraordinary amount of consultation… That was a painful process because, when you talk to lots of people and you talk to them in depth, they all think they are going to then get some of what they want… But, anyway, we went for the best mix we could," s*aid one official from the FCDO (then FCO), referring to the 2019 London Conference.

3.2. Filling a gap in international provision

The MFC helps to fill a genuine gap in international support for media freedom. The problem – as the architects of the MFC initially saw it – was that existing international human rights obligations and specific media freedom and safety of journalists' agreements sit with the UN system (notably the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, and other UN mechanisms such as the Human Rights Council). This created delays and little hope for action on controversial issues because of political disagreements by states like Russia and China. As the UK's FCDO has stated:

> *"Existing human rights frameworks and instruments... provide, in theory, for sufficient protection for all. The problem is one of implementation rather than one of standards. With this in mind, the UK is considering how best to add value and reinforce existing mechanisms, including those of the UN and other international organisations."*[97]

Most members of the CSO community appear to agree: as Scott Griffen (International Press Institute) stated to the UK's Foreign Affairs Committee:

> *"We do not need to wait for another convention… [or] more international instruments. The UK is in a position to take action together with like-minded states."* [98]

And, as one civil servant at the FCDO (then FCO) put it, more informally: *"resolutions with the UN saying how good media freedom is, are important, but they don't fix stuff."*

From the outset, the idea of being able to 'fix' individual cases appears to have been one of the main rationales for establishing the MFC as a new mechanism. For example, another INGO representative

[96] Joel Simon, In the battle between truth and lies, we must protect the world's journalists, The Guardian, December 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/11/truth-lies-journalists-nobel-prize-prison
[97] Written evidence – Foreign and Commonwealth Office (GMF0004) para 4.22, May 2019
[98] Foreign Affairs Committee Oral evidence: The FCO and global media freedom, HC 1920 Tuesday 21 May 2019 Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 21 May 2019

said: *"[a] multilateral body doesn't have as much teeth or weight as an actual government coming out and saying something or speaking outright on a case."*

The potential problem is that the MFC could be seen as undermining UN resolutions and bodies since the UN is, in effect, being bypassed in favour of a more select grouping of nations (i.e. the members of the Coalition). In public statements, the MFC Executive Group has been at pains to praise and include UN bodies (for example, the prominent participation at the 2019 London Conference of UNESCO's Director General, Audrey Azoulay) and has deliberately given a central place to UNESCO by way of funding the Global Media Defence Fund. It is clear that the MFC has tried to complement rather than to duplicate other media-related international efforts. For example, the MFC has welcomed and acknowledged the work of the Forum for Information and Democracy.[99] The MFC has also 'underscored the important role' played by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other regional bodies like the Organization of American States and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights.[100]

Arguably, the MFC could potentially be seen as duplicating the Council of Europe's work on freedom of expression.[101] However, the key difference is that the membership of the MFC goes far beyond Europe. Another difference is that the MFC works within bilateral diplomacy whereas both the UN and the Council of Europe are intergovernmental bodies.

Officials in UK and Canada were clearly acutely aware, at the outset, of the need for the MFC to have a wide geographical scope and diversity of membership. They felt they achieved this, partly by including countries like Ghana and the Maldives in the Executive Group.

On the issue of diversity, an official from the UK's FCDO told us:

> "*We didn't want it to just be seen as a white man's club. We wanted to make sure that we had got key people from the global south. So, we looked at Ghana because they had been very supportive; they had made some changes and got a new government. And we were very keen to get Latin American countries brought in… So, yes, we started with our core allies and then we looked at making it more global, more representative*."

Another official from the FCDO said: *"the last thing you want is to be seen as a western organisation just bashing countries in the south."*

Despite these efforts to 'de-Westernise', the CN has called for *"a more diverse and pluralistic MFC membership and increased participation from the global South"* and other observers have echoed this criticism of the MFC.[102] As one NGO representative told us: *"The membership continues to be "Northern" or "Western" based, which has led to MFC ignoring important threats to freedom of expression over the last two years."*

[99] "The International Partnership on Information and Democracy is an intergovernmental non-binding agreement endorsed by 43 countries around the world to promote and implement democratic principles in the global information and communication space. It was formally signed during the 74th UN General Assembly in September 2019", see: https://informationdemocracy.org/
[100] Global Affairs Canada, Media Freedom Coalition ministerial communiqué, Government of Canada, November 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/11/media-freedom-coalition-ministerial-communique.html
[101] Council of Europe, Freedom of Expression, https://www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression
[102] Statement by the Media Freedom Coalition - Advisory Network to the Global Conference for Media Freedom Ministerial Meeting. November 16, 2020, Mada Center, https://www.madacenter.org/en/article/1328/

3.3. Motivations for joining: 'Carrot' and 'Stick'

Membership of the MFC was designed to be a 'carrot' held out to some states, to encourage them to improve their record on media freedom 'at home'. The threat of exclusion from the MFC is the 'stick' which could potentially motivate states to improve their support for media freedom.

Certainly, a strong motive for many countries to become members of the MFC was a desire to convey a positive image of their country as a defender of media freedom. As one diplomat from a member state in Europe told us:

> *"Every country has an image. So, when I tell you that I want my country to have the identity and the image of a champion of free speech, if the others start telling me that, 'No, you're actually doing it all wrong. You're being mean to independent media and journalists,' my work is ruined. So, this is the sanction."*

At the first MFC Conference, one NGO representative told us that there is *"nothing wrong*" in states wanting *"to look good"*. He continued:

> *"I think… governments should be able to be rewarded politically for paying homage to … freedom of the press. I have got no problem with them. In fact, I want to live in a world in which politicians gain brownie points by working on these issues… Even if they are slightly imperfect, they should be rewarded."*

Staying in step with their geographical neighbours was another motivation for states to join. An official of one of the original MFC member states, said, their 'first instinct' was to join 'immediately' whilst, at the same time, checking with their neighbours:

> *"We saw [a neighbouring country] was there [in the Coalition] … Also some EU members and… some other very like-minded countries with whom we [have] the same kind of voice... and then it makes it easier [to decide to join]".*

For several other member countries, the act of signing up was a deeper symbol of democratisation. For example, one official from the Maldives Ministry of Foreign Affairs told us that his country wanted to be part of the Coalition to affirm its new democratic identity and to turn away from the previous presidency of Abdulla Yameen, during which journalists were detained and killed.[103] The chance to be on the Executive Group was, for him, just *"one further step"* in this process.

Other positive examples of member states effecting change domestically, apparently as a direct result of the MFC include Sierra Leone (joined July 2021), Canada (Co-Chair) and the Netherlands (Co-Chair).[104]

According to the UK Government, *"Sustained Government lobbying and technical support led to the Sierra Leone parliament voting in July 2020 to repeal its criminal libel law and implement a new Independent Media Commission Act. This Act removes the threat of imprisonment to suppress journalism and creates an independent commission to retain standards."*[105]

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[103] President, Abdulla Yameen, of the Maldives was openly hostile to journalists during an eight year period of autocracy which effectively ended in 2018 when President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih took office, and the Maldives rose in the RSF rankings. (Source: Patricia Gossman, Maldives Advances Media Freedom, But Long Way to Go, Human Rights Watch, April 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/21/maldives-advances-media-freedom-long-way-go# and RSF)

[104] There may be more domestic media-related reform made by other countries in the MFC, of which we are not aware, as a direct or indirect result of being part of the Coalition.

[105] See: FCDO update to UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee, February 2021 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/

The Maldives made a positive change in its domestic legislation as a direct result of joining the coalition – "*as a member of the Coalition you're forced to do better for your own journalists,*" said the Maldives High Commissioner to the UK, Dr Farah Faizal.[106] She went on to say "*by being part of the Coalition you look inwards, it gives your strength and makes for better regulation and a better environment for our own journalists. We moved up 48 places on the RSF index because we learned from others in the Coalition.*"

Canada made a change to its visa arrangements to help journalists in danger find refuge in Canada (June 2021). These changes directly followed recommendations made to the MFC by the High Level Panel and have been praised by human rights organisations as going further than any other government has to date, to incorporate special refugee recognition for the defenders of human rights and journalists.[107]

In addition, a bill was passed in the Dutch Parliament for the provision of an emergency visa for journalists at risk, one of the headline recommendations of the Panel's Safe Refuge Report. The High Level Panel has since written to the Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs to take forward the implementation of this recommendation.[108]

The possibility of MFC membership was used as a 'carrot' in the case of Malta. In this instance, we understand from our interviews that initially the Maltese Foreign Ministry let it be known that Malta wanted to join the Coalition but, at that stage (2019), they were refused because of lack of official progress on an enquiry over the killing of investigative journalist, Daphne Caruana Galizia. We understand that, since then, because there has been a change in government in Valletta, as well as a public enquiry about this murder, the MFC has recently looked more favourably on Malta's desire to join. One official from an Executive Group country said:

> *"It's about being internationally recognised. The Galizia murder made the government feel uncomfortable about being in a negative spotlight. Also Malta has been grey-listed financially about money laundering. They don't like it. So if they can show they've been able to join the coalition they could cure this negative spotlight... They might think it's an easy win to join but they have to prove they are serious first."*

We conclude that the 'carrot' and 'stick' motivations associated with MFC membership have motivated at least some states to make improvements to their support for media freedom.

3.4. Internal resourcing and collaboration: looking to the future of the Coalition and its membership

In its first year, the UK's FCDO was criticised for its management of the MFC. For example, the UK Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee said the FCDO had: 'allocated too few resources, given too little detail about how it will fulfil its campaign, and taken too passing an interest in how to make it sustainable.'[109]

The CN complained on several occasions about the slow response rates of officials on the Executive Group, and some observers and CN members attributed this to lack of financial and human resources on the UK and Canadian teams. As one member of the CN put it:

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[106] World Press Freedom Day, 29th April 2021, UNESCO, panel by the Media Freedom Coalition: 'The Role of Governments in Protecting Media Freedom: What More can the Media Freedom Coalition Do?'
[107] Mia Rabson, Canada introduces refugee stream for journalists, others who defend human rights, The Globe and Mail, July 2021, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-introduces-refugee-stream-for-journalists-others-who-defend/
[108] Myrthe Nauta, Dutch House of Representatives votes in favour of emergency visa for journalists, Free Press Unlimited, July 2021, https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/current/dutch-house-representatives-votes-favor-emergency-visa-journalists
[109] Foreign Affairs Committee, "Media freedom is under attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty, House of Commons, September 2019, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1920/1920.pdf

> "*They were setting up a new intergovernmental organisation. That's huge…. But I don't think they really know what they were taking on.*"

Dissatisfaction has also been expressed (so far mostly privately) by members of the High Level Panel about the lack of meaningful engagement from the Executive Group with the Panel's detailed work and recommendations. Consideration of the Panel's reports has tended to be very slow and superficial. The High Level Panel have thus far only had to access state members indirectly, through the Co-Chairs.

We also heard off-the-record criticisms of an apparent lack of understanding about media freedom issues among the civil servants on the Co-Chair teams and a clear culture clash between the long-term civil servant perspective and the urgent advocacy culture of the CN: *"Yes, there is a clash of cultures",* said one member of the CN. *"We are all about urgent action but they are operating on years and years perspective. They were proud of their statement on Belarus – they thought it was so fast – but we'd mobilised on the Sunday before and we were much quicker."*

Some of the administrative and management shortcomings were acknowledged by officials, particularly as the COVID-19 pandemic started negatively impacting foreign ministry teams in London and Ottawa. As one civil servant said: *"At the moment*, *assuring the secretariat function is draining our resources."*

However, there is a newly appointed secretariat that will assume the day-to-day administration, coordination and communications of the MFC. The UK FCDO described this move as follows: 'By institutionalising the Coalition through a secretariat and online presence, we are taking steps to increase its profile'.[110]

The plans for a new secretariat have been welcomed by some stakeholders, although one member of the CN voiced a concern:

> *"The failings of the Coalition may be pinned to the secretariat rather than the states. Having a secretariat might help for comms but it might mask a lack of will to take action. It might get bogged down in procedure. The states will still be very slow-moving and the secretariat won't be able to do anything about that."*

The US has recently been much more enthusiastic about the Coalition, announcing in December 2021 that it will "*increase its engagement with the Media Freedom Coalition, an intergovernmental partnership working to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists worldwide."* [111]

This could possibly mean more staff time and resources devoted to diplomatic efforts by the US within the MFC in future. US President, Joe Biden, also announced significant new funding to media defence, media viability and public interest media via various separate international funds (see Section 5 'Developing and Defending the Media' for more detail about funding).

[110] FCDO, "Secretariat for Media Freedom Coalition: Terms of Reference" September 2021

[111] The White House, Fact Sheet: Announcing the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, December 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/09/fact-sheet-announcing-the-presidential-initiative-for-democratic-renewal/



Section 4. Shining a Spotlight on media freedom?



The Coalition has failed to generate any significant press coverage of its activities, except around its initial conference in 2019. It has been largely invisible due to a weak online presence and lack of a communications strategy, for the first two years of operations. As a result, its activities – indeed the very existence of the MFC – have been practically hidden from general view.

Another key purpose of the MFC is to 'advocate for media freedom' by 'shining a global spotlight on the issue'.[112] Specifically, the MFC's ToR commits its members to 'shining a light on violations related to and abuses of media freedom, bringing them to the attention of the global public'.[113]

This section evaluates the extent to which the MFC is meeting this aim, by examining the attention it has attracted: (1) within news coverage and on social media; (2) at international fora, such as multilateral summits; and (3) amongst media support practitioners, journalists and other relevant civil society activists.

Our analysis is based on the results of a content analysis of online news coverage and social media, a survey of media support practitioners and interviews with other relevant stakeholders. Our content analysis examined all online, English-language news coverage and social media commentary of the

[112] FCO (2019a). The Global Conference for media freedom: Written evidence from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to the Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into global media freedom (GMF0004). Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 03 April 2019.
[113] FCO and FCDO, Guidance: Media Freedom Coalition: terms of reference, Gov.uk, March 2020, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference/media-freedom-coalition-terms-of-reference

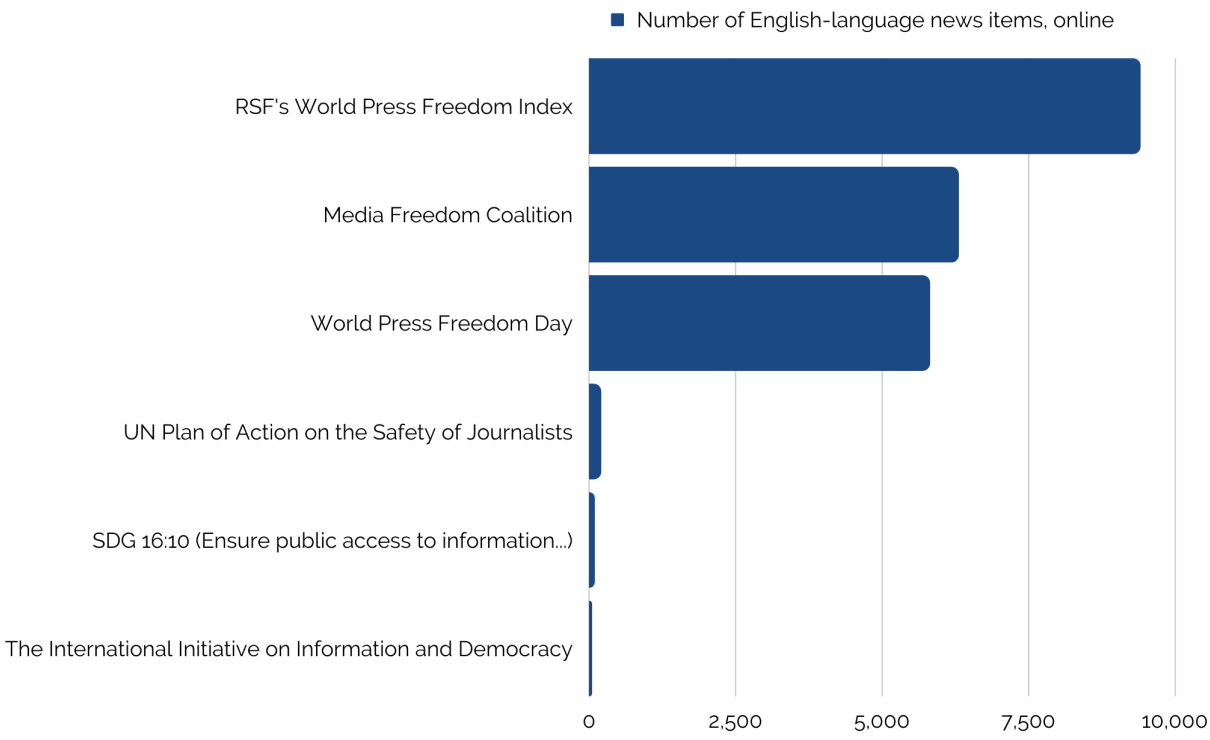
MFC and its associated activities from July 2019 to July 2020.[114] Our survey was completed by 64 media freedom practitioners and activists in 24 countries where media freedom is under threat and was carried out online, between June and July 2020.[115]

4.1. Generating news coverage and discussion on social media

The results of our analysis of media content show that, in its first year, the MFC and its associated activities did help to shine a spotlight on the issue of media freedom. It generated a significant amount of new, online, English-language news coverage and social media commentary.

Specifically, Figure 1 shows that the various initiatives and activities related to the MFC were mentioned in 6,300 different English-language news items and 56,700 tweets, within the 12 months from July 2019 to June 2020. This represents a significant amount of coverage when compared to other international media freedom initiatives. Only RSF's World Press Freedom Index received more English-language news coverage over this 12 month period.

Figure 1: Number of news items about different media freedom initiatives (online, in English) (July 2019 to June 2020)



[114] The full results of this content analysis have been published in a report entitled 'Shining a spotlight on media freedom? Media coverage of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom' (Scott, Bunce and Myers, 2020); This research entailed keyword searches of English-language news coverage worldwide and English language Tweets using Google Trends, Google searches, and a digital news source database called Meltwater, with over 320,000 sources, spanning 191 countries, over a period of a year (1st July 2019 to 30th June 2020).

[115] These practitioners were all partners of the Netherlands-based NGO, Free Press Unlimited; The Survey Monkey questionnaire was administered in Bangladesh, Bolivia, Central African Republic, D. R. Congo, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Mali, Myanmar, Nepal, Nicaragua, Niger, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Senegal, Somalia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe (and one additional country from Central Africa and one from MENA region). Answers were received from 22 women (34%) and 42 men (66%) from 60 organisations. The two questions posed (in English, French and Spanish) were 1) 'Have you heard of the Global Campaign for Media Freedom?' and 2) 'If so, to what extent do you agree with this statement? "The Global Campaign for Media Freedom (launched by the United Kingdom and Canada in July 2019) is helping to defend media where it is under threat around the world?" The question used a 9-point scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 9 (strongly agree) and included optional text boxes for qualitative answers.

However, this spotlight was fleeting. Figure 2 reveals that this media attention was primarily focused on the inaugural Global Media Freedom Conference in London in July 2019. Indeed, 83 per cent of all English-language news articles about the MFC, and 79 per cent of tweets, referred explicitly to this conference. Overall, 69 per cent of all mentions of the MFC – in both news coverage and on twitter – occurred within two weeks of the London Conference.

Figure 2: Mentions of the Media Freedom Coalition in online, English-language news coverage and on Twitter over the year July 2019 – June 2020.

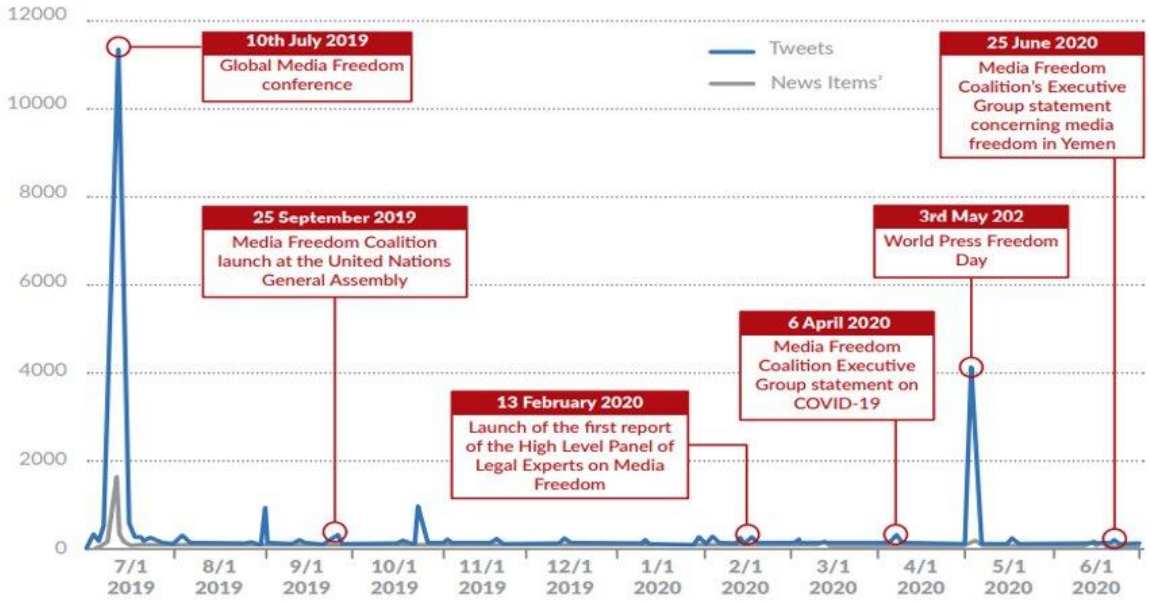


Figure 2 also shows that, outside the London Conference, there was only one significant spike in coverage. This was linked to a statement made by the MFC on World Press Freedom Day on 3rd May 2020. Following this statement, the MFC was mentioned in 181 different news items and 4,060 tweets.

Our analysis also showed that, in 2019-20, media coverage of the MFC focused on well-known personalities associated with the campaign – especially the then Deputy Chair of the High Level Panel, Amal Clooney, and the UK's Foreign Secretary (at the time) Jeremy Hunt. Amal Clooney's public profile helped draw attention to the MFC, as evidenced by her being mentioned in half of all news items (See Table 3). Moreover, the tweet about the MFC with the greatest reach (20.6 million) was by the Reuters news agency, and reads, 'Human rights lawyer Amal Clooney defends media freedom at a conference in London'.[116] However, news coverage of Clooney was also very episodic – with 78 per cent of all mentions occurring within two weeks of the London Conference.

[116] Reuters, Twitter post, Twitter, July 2019, https://twitter.com/Reuters/status/1149324967755935747

Table 3: The most mentioned entities (individuals, countries and institutions) in online, English-language news and twitter coverage of the MFC (July 2019 to June 2020)

Top news entities	No.	%	Top Twitter entities	No.	%
United Kingdom	3949	75%	United Kingdom	13962	25%
United States	3372	64%	Julian Assange	8576	15%
London	3130	59%	London	7011	12%
Canada	2734	52%	Canada	6107	11%
Amal Clooney	2631	50%	Amal Clooney	3589	6%
Jeremy Hunt	2554	48%	Media Freedom Coalition	2941	5%
Donald Trump	2283	43%	Jeremy Hunt	2879	5%
Global Conference for Media Freedom	1871	35%	Russia	1951	3%
Chrystia Freeland	1668	32%	Pakistan	1936	3%
Saudi Arabia	1658	31%	BBC	1933	3%
George Clooney	1362	26%	Belmarsh	1728	3%
Jamal Khashoggi	1346	25%	Australia	1657	3%
United Nations	1096	21%	Dominic Raab	1655	3%
Foreign and Commonwealth Office	1011	19%	Media Freedom Conference	1587	3%
British Empire	928	18%	@Jonathan_K_Cook	1402	2%

The results of our content analysis also suggest that the MFC was more successful at 'shining a spotlight' on media freedom issues among its own member states than on the countries the MFC is targeting. The results in Table 3 show that critical, English-language news coverage of the MFC has focussed on threats to media freedom in the US, while critical Twitter commentary has focussed on the treatment of Julian Assange in the UK.

Specifically, Table 3 shows that Julian Assange (15 per cent) was by far the most frequently discussed individual on Twitter. He was mentioned around three times more often than Amal Clooney (six per cent) or Jeremy Hunt (five per cent). The hashtag #freeassange was also the third most commonly used on Twitter in discussions about the MFC – behind only #defendmediafreedom and #pressfreedom. Numerous tweets highlighted the apparent irony that the UK was establishing and leading an international initiative on media freedom, while simultaneously undermining free media, the critics asserted, in their handling of Assange. Indeed, 'irony' was the 20th most common keyword in tweets about the MFC.

Similarly, within news coverage of the MFC, the third most commonly mentioned individual was Donald Trump (43 per cent). Such coverage related almost exclusively to criticism of the US President's treatment of media in the US. For example, there was extensive news coverage of Amal

Clooney's conference speech where she said that *"the country of James Madison has a leader today who vilifies the media, making honest journalists all over the world more vulnerable to abuse*."[117]

In summary, our findings show that while the MFC did initially help to shine a spotlight on media freedom, by generating a significant amount of news coverage, this spotlight was very short-lived. Although the sample period of our study ended in 2020, there is little indication that media coverage of the MFC has increased significantly since.

4.2. Raising international attention

'Shining a global spotlight' on the issue of media freedom involves not only generating news coverage, but also raising its profile within the international community. In this respect, the inaugural Global Conference on Media Freedom, on 10th and 11th July 2019 was regarded by most of our interviewees as successfully drawing significant international attention to the issue of media freedom.

The London Conference was the first ever global ministerial gathering about media freedom and was attended by over 1,500 delegates from 100 countries, including 60 government ministers. The estimated cost of hosting the conference was £2.4 million (GBP). This amounted to nearly half the funds set aside by the UK Foreign Office for its 'Global Campaign for Media Freedom'.[118]

In an interview with us in May 2020, the former UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt, who oversaw the launch of the MFC, explained that he hoped this conference would:

> *"[…] serve as a pilot process of raising the price [of restricting media freedom] by attracting a lot of publicity. I always thought that, because the media care about media freedom, they would give a lot of publicity to this particular issue, and they did."*

As one UK official said:

> *"In terms of the conference [London 2019], yes, we were happy with how it went... we set out to bring journalists and politicians and civil society together... in a way that we thought hadn't been done before, and we were [tasked]... to get a real high-profile set of attendees to have a wide range of quite difficult discussions. I think, in the end, we felt that came off. The coverage I saw was, rightly, relatively positive."*

Although there were some criticisms from NGOs during the planning stages, the Conference was deemed a success by many in the international community for attracting the spotlight at the time. As one government official from Switzerland said:

> *"I think it was a good strategy to mobilise the type of crowd the London conference aimed to mobilise… the higher-level political attention and diplomatic circles… [There] was a plethora of parallel sessions and panel discussions where we had several perspectives from media houses themselves, from academia, from politicians… very diverse perspective[s]…very rich. It was good added value to what would otherwise be discussed at this global level."*

However, there was also a desire for the pledges made at the conference to be put into action, and, in the words of one media freedom activist, to *"give the media freedom campaign real policy weight,*

[117] Clooney, A. (2019). Addressing threats to media freedom: Amal Clooney's speech On day 1 of the Global Conference for Media Freedom, 19 July 2019.
[118] Foreign Affairs Committee, "Media freedom is under attack": The FCO's defence of an endangered liberty, House of Commons, September 2019, https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmfaff/1920/1920.pdf

beyond simply increasing communications activities and holding a media freedom conference in London."

Unfortunately, the 2nd Global Conference on Media Freedom, co-hosted by Canada and Botswana in November 2020, was far less successful in raising the profile of media freedom within the international community. Although it was well attended by Foreign Ministers, and addressed by Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, there were widespread frustrations amongst attendees about accessibility, attendance, the online format, and the limited and last-minute publicity for the conference. While preparations for this conference were inevitably hampered by the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 World Press Freedom Conference hosted by the Netherlands just a few weeks later demonstrated that such challenges could successfully be overcome.[119]

Beyond the MFC conferences, there is evidence to suggest that the MFC's activities have been associated with increased international attention to the issues of media freedom – although the MFC's direct contribution to this is difficult to discern. For example, the UK, as Co-Chair of the Coalition, has used its Presidency of the G7 in 2021 to ensure that media freedom was mentioned prominently in a range of relevant international statements and communiqués (see Table 4).

The MFC also held a virtual panel event at the World Press Freedom Day conference in Namibia in 2021 and the issue of media freedom featured heavily at the recent Summit for Democracy, hosted by the United States in December 2021. Indeed, 'Supporting Free and Independent Media' was one of five key areas of work the US Government committed itself to as part of its 'Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal'.[120] However, its commitment to 'increase its engagement with the Media Freedom Coalition' as part of this, suggests that the US Government's renewed commitment to media freedom may have emerged despite, rather than because of, its involvement with the MFC.

[119] World Press Freedom Conference 2020, see: https://www.wpfc2020.com/

[120] The White House, Fact Sheet: Announcing the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal, December 2021, https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/09/fact-sheet-announcing-the-presidential-initiative-for-democratic-renewal/

Table 4: References to the issue of media freedom within G7 statements in 2021

Statement	References to media freedom
Caris Bay G7 Summit Communique, 13th June 2021	We will work together to promote our shared values as open societies in the international system... We commit to: increase cooperation on supporting democracy, including through strengthening the G7 Rapid Response Mechanism to counter foreign threats to democracy including disinformation; strengthen media freedom and ensure the protection of journalists...
G7 Foreign and Development Ministers' Meeting: Communiqué, London, 5th May 2021	We commit to championing media freedom as a vital part of upholding democracy and human rights around the world. We condemn intimidation, harassment and violence against journalists, noting that women, and those in marginalised and vulnerable situations, are disproportionately targets, both online and offline. We recognise the importance of diverse voices in shaping public debate, promoting transparency and ensuring accountability. We welcome the work of the Media Freedom Coalition alongside other international initiatives and mechanisms, such as the Partnership for Information and Democracy, in striving to improve the media freedom environment globally and domestically. We welcome all efforts to defend media freedom through concerted diplomacy, advocacy and assistance. We ask our diplomatic missions to co-ordinate locally, including through the Coalition, to increase support to and engagement with journalists and independent media under threat. We each commit to lead by example, by undertaking domestic action, such as developing National Action Plans or similar measures, where appropriate, to improve the safety of journalists, access to information and sustainability of the media. We recognise the importance of improving media sustainability, increasing access to independent and diverse media and supporting journalists, in the context of SDG 16.10. We commit to providing practical, technical and programmatic support to journalists and media, including through voluntary contributions to the Global Media Defence Fund where possible. We also commit to improving the effectiveness of our support to media by working together and with others to track, co-ordinate and share best practice in this area.
G7 and Guest Countries: 2021 Open Societies Statement, 13th June 2021	Strengthen open societies globally by protecting civic space and media freedom, promoting freedom of expression, freedom of assembly and association, and freedom of religion or belief, and by tackling all forms of discrimination, including racism.

4.3. Recognition amongst media support practitioners

The results of our survey of 64 media support practitioners showed that in July 2020, over three quarters (78 per cent) of respondents had heard of the MFC.[121] However, respondents were more likely to have heard of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (87 per cent) and Sustainable Development Goal 16:10:2 (96 per cent).[122]

A slim majority (59 per cent) of respondents were positive about the work of the MFC so far and agreed that 'it is helping to defend media where it is under threat around the world', including 16 per cent who 'strongly agreed' with this statement.

While a quarter of respondents did not think the MFC was helping to defend media freedom, this included only one person (three per cent) who strongly disagreed. This respondent said they "*don't see its impact on the ground*".

Compared to other international media freedom initiatives, the MFC was perceived relatively favourably, especially given that it has only recently been established. Qualitative comments indicated cautious optimism about the MFC amongst most respondents. For example, one respondent commented that *"It is a good initiative led by powerful countries"*. However, another added that *"It will have to fund local journalists' rights defenders to make this a reality in our countries".*

It is worth noting that, as media freedom practitioners, our respondents are likely to have heard about the Coalition through their own networks. The respondents were also all partners of Free Press Unlimited (FPU) and some may have answered positively about the MFC in the questionnaire in a desire to 'look good' in the eyes of FPU (although in fact our questionnaire was completely independent of FPU). Nevertheless, the existence of the MFC appears to be viewed generally positively by our survey respondents.

By contrast, awareness of the MFC amongst other stakeholders, communicated with outside of our survey, appears to be low. For example, one interviewee respondent described the MFC's activities as *"barely known"* amongst international journalists and said that if journalists were aware of it *"they were generally enormously sceptical"* about the Coalition.

Similarly, very few of the journalists, civil society activists or media support practitioners we interviewed for either of our case studies in Sudan and the Philippines had heard of the MFC or any of its activities.

Indeed, several survey respondents commented that, although they were personally aware of the MFC, they felt it was not yet widely known. One journalist commented that, *"Here in my country, few press associations have been in contact or have already experienced this coalition."* Another media freedom activist said, *"I haven't seen much of their effort in this country in particular and I didn't personally read much about their work after the conference in London last year."*

Members of the CN also frequently lamented the lack of visibility, poor online-presence and poor communications by the MFC. In the words of one member of the CN: *"There is an emphasis on behind-the-scenes work. This contradicts with the 'shining a spotlight' focus [which is] supported by ministers – but when it comes down to civil servants, they are just less keen to generate publicity."*

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[121] Myers, Scott, Bunce, Practitioners' Attitudes towards the Global Campaign for Media Freedom, University of East Anglia and City, University of London, November 2020, http://pressfreedom.co.uk/practitioner-attitudes-towards-the-global-campaign-for-media-freedom/

[122] SDG 16.10.2: To ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements.

Recently, there has been a response to calls for better communications by the Coalition, and we understand that the Coalition has taken steps during the latter half of this year (2021) to address this communications gap – finally launching its website in December 2021, with the support of the Estonian Foreign Ministry. Furthermore, part of the new secretariat's brief is to '…build a clear brand identity, and effectively promote the Coalition's work with a view to ensuring its future sustainability and visibility.'[123]

[123] FCDO, "Secretariat for Media Freedom Coalition: Terms of Reference" September 2021.



Section 5. Developing and Defending the Media



The funds allocated to support media freedom under the MFC have been small. In the Philippines and Sudan (our case-studied countries), funded projects were relevant and well executed. However, they were an adjunct to diplomatic efforts and had little impact on levels of media freedom in these two countries.

In this section, we evaluate the financial support for projects to directly help journalists associated with the MFC. The Coalition's ToR require members to 'provide support and co-operate with organisations advocating for media freedom and the safety of journalists'. In addition, all MFC members sign a Pledge, which includes the following statement: 'we commit to supporting the work of the UN, and other organisations, to tackle a range of challenges affecting journalists. We welcome the creation of a Global Media Defence Fund to support journalists in distress, cover legal expenses and initiatives, create peer support networks and support governments to develop national action plans.'[124]

Here, we review two grant-making efforts, one by the UNESCO-administered GMDF and the other by the UK's FCDO as part of its MFC work.

5.1. What monetary pledges have been made?

At the 2019 Conference, the UK pledged £3 million (approx. $3.8 m USD or €3.57m) over five years and Canada has so far pledged two million Canadian Dollars (approx. $ 1.53m USD or €1.38m) to the newly established GMDF. Since then, the GMDF has also received contributions from a further 12

[124] FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Global pledge on media freedom, Gov.uk, July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-pledge-on-media-freedom/global-pledge-on-media-freedom

members (see Table 5).[125] On average, these 12 additional countries contributed EUR 70,000. 36 members of the MFC (72 per cent) have so far made no financial contribution to the GMDF, including Australia, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain and the US.

Table 5: Financial contributions made to the Global Media Defence Fund, as of Dec 2021[126]

MFC member	Contribution (EUR)	Date
UK	3 600 000 over 5 years (2019/2024)	July 2019
Canada	1 400 000 over 2 years (2019/2021)	July 2019
Germany	100 000 200 000	November 2020 April 2021
Switzerland	220 000	October 2021
France	115 000	September 2021
Japan	88 000	May 2021
New Zealand	60 000	June 2021
Czech Republic	11 421 11 729 10 281	December 2019 December 2020 August 2021
Serbia	30 000	November 2020
Luxembourg	10 000 10 000	February 2020 February 2021
Estonia	20 000	December 2020
Latvia	10 000	December 2019
Cyprus	10 000	December 2020
Slovakia	10 000	August 2021

According to UNESCO, this money 'will complement and synergise with other extra-budgetary funding modalities' supporting existing UN work on the safety of journalists.[127] In 2021-2022 the total amount available for funding projects under the GMDF is USD $1.3 million, distributed across 42 different projects (the previous year the total disbursed was slightly lower, at $1 million).

Several member countries in the Coalition continue to allocate bilateral funding for media development from their overseas aid budgets and there is a strong tradition of bilateral funding for media development.[128] In most cases, bilateral funding for media is much larger than the sums that have been pledged via the UNESCO GMDF. (Usually it is earmarked as 'media development' or 'communication for development', with media *freedom* being a smaller subset of this aid for media).

[125] Global Media Defence Fund, Growing interest in the Global Media Defence Fund: over 140 submissions received for the second call for partnerships, UNESCO, December 2021, https://en.unesco.org/news/growing-interest-global-media-defence-fund-over-140-submissions-received-second-call

[126] Global Media Defence Fund, 2021 Call for Partnerships, UNESCO, June 2021, https://en.unesco.org/global-media-defence-fund

[127] The pre-existing 'funding modalities' supporting UNESCO's work on the safety of journalists are the Multi-donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists and the International Programme for the Development of Communication (IPDC). UNESCO, UNESCO welcomes the establishment of a Global Media Defense Fund, with initial funding by UK and Canada, July 2019, https://en.unesco.org/news/unesco-welcomes-establishment-global-media-defense-fund-initial-funding-uk-and-canada

[128] Shanthi Kalathil, A Slowly Shifting Field: Understanding Donor Priorities in Media Development, CIMA, April 2017, https://www.cima.ned.org/publication/slowly-shifting-field/

Worldwide aid spending on media-support by OECD donors, taken as a whole, has averaged about $450 million USD per year over the last decade.[129]

In 2019-20, the UK's FCDO (then FCO) allocated a sum of just over £665,000 GBP as 'media freedom programme funds' to support 20 media projects; and in 2020-21 allocated £250,000 for projects in at least four countries. These funds were separate from the UK's contributions to the UNESCO GMDF, and were also distinct from funding by the UK's Department for International Development's (DFID) media-support projects, as this was before the two departments merged in 2020. Again, these media freedom programme funds were relatively small amounts, but served to signal that the UK's Foreign Office (as it then was) was willing to make a financial as well as a diplomatic contribution to the issue of media freedom. (At the same time, it should be noted that the UK's DFID allocated considerable sums to media projects – in 2019 DFID committed £27 million to a mixture of media development and improving/defending media freedom in developing countries).[130]

In the Philippines and Sudan, media activities funded by the GMDF and by the UK's FCDO funds, reflected the global pattern, in being only a small part of international aid to support independent media. For example, in the Philippines, Canada had invested in the sector long before the MFC, notably through the Marshall McLuhan Fellowship for investigative journalism established in 1997 by the University of Toronto and the Canadian Embassy. Furthermore, the USAID-funded Initiative for Media Freedom, administered through Internews, for instance, is programmed to support a broad consortium of media organisations in the Philippines with $7 million USD in grants for five years. This $7 million USD for one media project in the Philippines clearly dwarfs the UNESCO GMDF projects which averages at just $31,000 USD per project, and the UK Embassy's grant budget to selected media NGOs in the Philippines also looks tiny in comparison, at just £15,000 GBP for 2020-21 (approx. $20,000 USD).

5.2. How have funds been spent?

UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund (a 'multi-donor trust fund') is designed to be: 'a responsive and effective mechanism to support 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.'[131]

The GMDF has four 'key approaches':

- **Output 1:** *Fostering* international legal cooperation, as well as the sharing and implementation of good practices to promote the defence of journalists under attack;
- **Output 2:** *Reinforcing* the operationalisation of national protection mechanisms and peer support networks, to ensure journalists' rapid access to legal assistance, bolster their defence and enhance their safety, taking into account the gendered nature of the threats they face;
- **Output 3:** *Supporting* investigative journalism that contributes to reduced impunity for crimes against journalists, and enhancing the safety of those conducting this line of work; and

[129] Mary Myers and Linet Angaya Juma, Defending Independent Media: A Comprehensive Analysis of Aid Flows, CIMA Digital Report, June 2018, https://www.cima.ned.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/CIMA-AidData-Report_web_150ppi_rev.pdf
[130] DFID and Harriett Baldwin MP, UK aid "bold new support" to promote media freedom around the world, Gov.uk, July 2019, https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-aid-bold-new-support-to-promote-media-freedom-around-the-world--2
[131] FCO and FCDO, Policy paper: Ministerial meeting on media freedom concluding statement: a global responsibility, Gov.uk, September 2019 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/media-freedom-ministerial-meeting-at-unga-2019-statement-on-global-responsibility/ministerial-meeting-on-media-freedom-concluding-statement-a-global-responsibility

- **Output 4:** *Enhancing* structures for fostering strategic litigation in order to protect environments where the legal frameworks are conducive to an independent, free, and pluralistic media ecosystem.'[132]

Under Output 1, the GMDF supports the work of the IBAHRI which serves as the Secretariat to the Independent High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, as well as the civil society Consultative Network.

Under Outputs 2, 3 and 4 the GMDF supports local, national and regional projects through an annual competitive call for proposals. According to UNESCO, during 2020/21 the fund was: 'directly benefitting over 1,700 journalists, 170 lawyers and 65 civil society organisations, among many others. The GMDF is contributing to a safer and free environment for journalists by supporting over 850 cases of legal assistance (legal consultations, representation, etc.), 46 strategic litigation cases, and 110 investigations on crimes against journalists, as well as the establishment of over 10 networks of lawyers, the operationalisation of over 10 legal units for the provision of legal assistance to journalists and media, the production of 12 legal handbooks for journalists, and over 35 capacity-building activities for journalists and lawyers – among many other activities.'[133]

These GMDF projects are mostly located in Africa, the Arab States, Asia and the Pacific, and are implemented mainly by 'national and grassroots organisations'. For example, in Somalia, the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) was one beneficiary of the GMDF in 2020 and used the funds 'to secure legal representation for journalists by establishing a network of lawyers across the country … trained and ready to help journalists who are thrown into detention or dragged to the courts because of their journalism or media work.'[134] Other beneficiaries include the Journalists' Association of Bhutan, the Gulf Centre for Human Rights (Lebanon) and there are also international organisations, such as RSF (France) and The Centre for Law and Democracy (Canada), receiving small grants.[135]

Separately from UNESCO, the UK has allocated special 'Media Freedom Programme Funds' from the FCDO (totalling £665,000 in 2019-20 and £250,000 in 2020-21). Table 6 below is the list of small projects funded bilaterally by the UK's FCDO in 2019-20.

[132] Global Media Defence Fund, UNESCO, https://en.unesco.org/global-media-defence-fund
[133] Global Media Defence Fund, Growing interest in the Global Media Defence Fund: over 140 submissions received for the second call for partnerships, UNESCO, December 2021, https://en.unesco.org/news/growing-interest-global-media-defence-fund-over-140-submissions-received-second-call
[134] UNESCO, Fostering media freedom and ethical journalism in Somalia, September 2021, https://en.unesco.org/news/fostering-media-freedom-and-ethical-journalism-somalia
[135] Global Media Defence Fund, Growing interest in the Global Media Defence Fund: over 140 submissions received for the second call for partnerships, UNESCO, December 2021, https://en.unesco.org/news/growing-interest-global-media-defence-fund-over-140-submissions-received-second-call

Table 6: UK FCDO Media Freedom Programme Funded Projects 19/20[136]

Region	Country	Project
Africa	South Sudan	Enhancing Journalism Skills Training for Media Practitioners in South Sudan: To improve the quality of news reporting and information for citizens to make correct and informed decisions.
Africa	Sudan	Developing a Media Reform Roadmap to feed into the National Action Plan and Capacity Building for journalists in Countering Fake News in Sudan: To initiate the reform of media sector in the post revolution Sudan and enhance the capacities of journalists in social media and countering fake news.
Africa	Liberia	Liberia – Strengthening Media Freedom through an Enabling Media Regulatory Environment: To strengthen the capacity of journalists and civil society to effectively advocate for improvements in Liberia's media regulatory environment, and promote responsible journalism to ensure protection of media freedom.
Africa	Angola	Together for Media Freedom: Improve the capacity of Angolan civil society organisations to promote the free exercise of press freedom and strengthen support and protection mechanisms for journalists.
Africa	Somalia/ Somaliland	Strengthening Media freedom: By improving working relationships between law enforcement agencies and Journalists. The purpose of the project is to identify the legal gaps including application of due process of law, arrest and detention of journalists and application Somali criminal procedure code on cases related to FoE.
Africa	Guinea	Media Freedom Campaign: To ensure free and fair media ahead of the upcoming elections.
Africa	Kenya	Symposium & Introspective on Media Freedom in Kenya: To kickstart a journalist and media industry-led conversation on Media Freedom in Kenya, covering four key themes – trust, safety, sustainability and misinformation.
Africa	Rwanda	Rwandan Inquirer: Empowering Investigative Journalism in Rwanda through the Right of Access to Information; and developing investigative journalism through a blend of capacity building/training and production of news articles.
Americas	Paraguay	Media Freedom Fortnight in Paraguay: Stimulate a national conversation about media freedom in Paraguay by co-hosting a national conference with the Government and providing training for journalists and government officials on journalist safety and mobile journalism.
Americas	Honduras	Defending Media Freedom through reporting and writing: Encourage journalists to write and report with more confidence on the range of issues surrounding human rights in Honduras.
Americas	Peru	Scoping visit to the UK to strengthen Peruvian public broadcasting service: To help the Peruvian Government strengthen independent public media broadcasting.

[136] Some of the projects in this table and the next were funded by other 'funding streams' within the FCO/FCDO, not exclusively via the Media Freedom Team.

Americas	Peru/Bolivia	Strengthening safety awareness for journalists in Peru and Bolivia: The project aims to provide investigative journalists in remote regions of Peru and Bolivia with the information and tools they need to manage the personal and digital security/safety risks they face in their work.
Asia Pacific	Indonesia	Media Freedom Indonesia: To increase media freedom in Indonesia by challenging remaining state restrictions through lobbying, discussions and events involving relevant stakeholders, including the protection and training of journalists, and countering disinformation.
Asia Pacific	Philippines	British Embassy Manila Media Freedom Action Plan: Promote and protect media freedom by engaging government and CSOs to support the National Action Plan on Media Freedom and promote media freedom and FoE by raising awareness on the issues surrounding journalists and human rights defenders in the country.
EECAD	Kyrgyzstan	Capacity building of Kyrgyz and Central Asian investigative journalism: To increase quality and quantity of investigative journalism in the Kyrgyz Republic and Central Asia region.
Europe	Turkey	Video Journalism Training for Regional Media Organisations in Turkey: To increase video journalism capacity and to present an international 'best example' to set standards for regional media operating across Turkey.

The following year (2020/21) the UK Parliament published a brief summary of the way UK 'programme funds' were used during 2020, in various countries like Egypt and Belarus. Table 7 below provides a summary. (Though this list may be incomplete, it still gives a sense of the sort of small projects the UK supported in 2020.)

Table 7: UK FCDO Media Freedom Programme Funded Projects Financial Year 20/21[137]

Country	Project
Philippines	Funding a local NGO to upskill local journalists to counter disinformation about COVID-19.
India	Funding workshops for journalists in India on reporting violence against women and girls.
Egypt	Funding a programme of technical support and capacity building to six independent media outlets in Egypt.
Belarus	The FCDO has allocated an extra £950,000 worth of support to media freedom to enable outlets across all regions of the county to remain open and maintain a functional level of equipment.

5.3. Have funds been well-spent?

To help answer whether the funds have been well spent, in this section we have examined two case studies: how media freedom grants were spent in the Philippines and Sudan in 2020/1. To our knowledge, there has not yet been any independent *global* evaluation of how the GMDF and other small grants allocated under the Coalition have been spent, although we understand an independent evaluation of the UNESCO Fund will be due after five years of operations.

[137] See: UK Government response to Foreign Affairs Committee report, February 2021 https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4931/documents/49335/default/

It is noticeable that the focus of the UK FCDO's funding takes a wider definition of media freedom than the UNESCO fund, which appears to adhere quite strictly to its original focus on investigative journalism, law and legal defence for media workers. For instance, the UK's funding incorporates media literacy trainings (e.g. Philippines), basic journalism skills (e.g. South Sudan) and increased video journalism (e.g. Turkey). This perhaps reflects an acknowledgement that defending media freedom is a broader issue than journalists' safety – and relates to issues such as the economic crisis in public interest media, disinformation and other systemic issues facing independent media worldwide.

5.3.1. Media Development Projects in the Philippines

In the Philippines, we found that the projects implemented by the 'British Embassy Manila Media Freedom Action Plan' were relevant and timely, though small in size, due to limited budgets.[138] Our interviews with bilateral and multilateral partners describe the Campaign and the MFC as welcome additional mechanisms to strengthen pre-existing structures. Campaign funds were spent on:

- Advocacy related activities directly implemented by the Embassy including receptions, roundtables, and a 'media freedom caravan', i.e. a series of public events implemented through partnerships with journalism schools, particularly the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila, and Miriam College. Consistent with the FCDO's visual branding campaigns, these public events included photography exhibits and the use of colourful benches decorated with a quote from Winston Churchill, related to media freedom.
- Small grants were given to NGOs such as HR Online and Thompson Reuters for journalist safety trainings; support for women journalists' safety; and media literacy seminars leading to the drafting of a media literacy curriculum for use by the Philippine Department of Education.
- The British Embassy had initially intended to support the regional roll-out of the Philippine Plan of Action on Safety of Journalists (appears in Table 6 above). Although embassy officials attended several of the regional consultations that informed the Plan's formulation, grant support was delayed and discontinued due to the pandemic. In the meantime, available resources have been realigned towards addressing COVID-19 disinformation (appears in Table 7 above).

In sum, our research in the Philippines found that the MFC and the local initiatives implemented by the British Embassy in the Philippines have been small but have presented value-for-money and the potential to strengthen pre-existing structures by providing top-up resources and a degree of flexibility not possible with other donors. However, local journalists and human rights workers viewed the projects as largely symbolic – not addressing the core problems of accountability in the Philippines.[139]

5.3.2. Media Development Projects in Sudan

In Sudan, our assessment is more mixed and is overshadowed by the recent coup (October 2021), which has dashed many of the hopes and democratic reforms that were started by Sudan's transitional government between 2019 and 2021. UNESCO's project in Sudan was a Media Reform Roadmap devised during this transitional period.[140]

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[138] The UK's Embassy's grant budget in Manila amounted to GBP £70,000 for 2019-2020, with pandemic-related aid cuts slashing the 2020-2021 allocation to only GBP £15,000. A new call for proposals of up to GBP £10,000 has been released for the 2021-2022 cycle.
[139] More detail can be found in our case study at the end of this report and our separate report entitled 'Reviewing the Global Campaign for Media Freedom in the Philippines' by Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez (2021)
[140] UN Sudan, 2020 Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan, September 2020, https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Media%20Reform%20Roadmap%20for%20Sudan.pdf

The UK initiated and funded this UNESCO Roadmap to the tune of approximately £150,000 (GBP), with UNESCO and UNDP providing some tens of thousands from their own funds. The result of 13 workshops and 66 'expert meetings', all around the country, the Roadmap called on the Sudanese Government to tackle 28 comprehensive 'action' items. Among them were legal changes:

- Replacing a 2009 press law that permitted prepublication censorship;
- Passing a new broadcasting law to allow for the independent regulation of radio and TV; and
- Enacting regulations to allow transparency of media ownership and prevent excessive media concentration.

The proposal also called for institution building and restructuring: the overhaul of state-owned media to guarantee editorial independence; the creation of an independent agency to oversee the distribution of government advertising; and the development of a government office to oversee freedom of information requests. Ambitiously, it called for most of these reforms to be completed by the end of 2022. Few if any, of these reforms are likely to take place in the medium-term, given the current political situation.

In summary, on the positive side, this media reform roadmap in Sudan was comprehensive and a result of wide consultations, according to the majority of our 35 interviewees. On the negative side, it was overly ambitious and, crucially, UNESCO did not manage to ensure ownership by entities in the transitional government to carry it through – even while the civilian side of the transitional government still held political power.[141]

It is clear from our case studies in the Philippines and Sudan that grant-funding by members of the Coalition under the MFC umbrella was, and is, regarded by all stakeholders as a small, though welcome, *adjunct* to the more important work of diplomacy and advocacy to change policy and politics around media freedom. The current situation in Sudan especially – although this is true of the Philippines too – shows that without political will and government buy-in to the principles of media freedom and reform, small projects aimed at media freedom are symbolic, albeit well-intentioned. Diplomatic actions such as observation of Filipino journalists' trials by members of the diplomatic corps have perhaps been just as important, if not more so, and have had little or no direct financial costs.[142]

Nevertheless, we should add an important parenthesis: since the MFC's launch there have been a number of signs that international donors and private philanthropists have either committed, or are signalling their readiness to commit, larger sums of money to media development. For instance, the US Government recently announced: a large contribution (up to $30m USD) to the new International Fund for Public Interest Media; a media viability accelerator (to improve business models); $236m USD in 2022 to support independent media around the globe (40 per cent increase from 2020); and a new liability fund to support journalists threatened by vexatious law suits (SLAPPs) – all announced at the Summit for Democracy (9/10th December 2021). Additionally, during the 2020 World Press Freedom Day Conference the Netherlands announced donation of €7 million 'to promote media

[141] More detail can be found in our case study and our separate report for the Center for International Media Assistance, by Mary Myers and Lina Yassin (forthcoming).

[142] "A prominent opinion editor and academic [in the Philippines] observed that Regional Trial Court judges handling cases such as that of Maria Ressa and Rey Santos were more careful knowing that diplomats from the UK, Canada, Australia, Belgium, France, and the European Delegation were observing proceedings, either on Zoom during the lockdowns or onsite prior to March 2021." – see: Ica Fernandez, Philippines Case Study (version 4 22nd Nov, 2021, p. 18)

freedom and the safety of journalists worldwide'.[143] Although this money is not being directly channelled through the MFC, the fact that states have been convened under the MFC banner and have, together, moved media freedom up the international agenda, may be an overall trend for growing support for media freedom, of which the MFC is a part.

143 This was announced as part of The Hague Commitment made in 2020 at a conference marking World Press Freedom Day hosted by the Netherlands. "In a concrete response to the Round Table of Ministers, the Netherlands is earmarking €7 million to promote press freedom and the safety of journalists worldwide. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs will collaborate on this with UNESCO and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). Special attention will be paid to the position of female journalists, access to information and ending impunity for crimes against journalists." Ministry of Foreign Affairs, New support for press freedom at international conference hosted by foreign minister Stef Blok, Government of the Netherlands, December 2020, https://www.government.nl/ministries/ministry-of-foreign-affairs/news/2020/12/09/new-support-for-press-freedom-at-international-conference-hosted-by-foreign-minister-stef-blok



Conclusion

"It is time for states that claim they defend democracy to start acting like it."
- Amal Clooney, 2021[144]

After two years, the Media Freedom Coalition is only partially achieving its objectives.[145] It has made an ambitious start, attracting a relatively large number of member states and has established a collegiate way of working.

But, so far, the actions of the MFC have not been as rapid, bold or visible as was initially promised. This has been partly due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but COVID only partially accounts for the fact that the MFC's working methods have been slow and lacking transparency, its communications poor, its financial commitments minimal, and its political impacts have been small. Throughout the first two years, there have been resourcing problems and insufficient communication between the MFC and other stakeholders. In the words of Amal Clooney, *"… it is clear that if we do nothing the international response to attacks on press freedom will remain the same: uneven and rarely effective. And impunity will continue to be the norm… states' responses to our recommendations will reveal whether they are interested in making statements or in actually finding solutions to one of the most urgent threats to democracy we are facing today".*[146]

[144] Amal Clooney, Don't let the autocrats win – how Biden can use the Democracy Summit to build back media freedoms, Just Security, Reiss Center on Law and Security at New York University School of Law July 2021, https://www.justsecurity.org/77636/dont-let-the-autocrats-win-how-biden-can-use-the-democracy-summit-to-build-back-media-freedoms/
[145] Image by Marcel Grabowski/FCDO under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.0/
[146] Amal Clooney remarks at launch of the High Level Panel's report on Promoting More Effective Investigations into Abuses against Journalists, IBA, November 2020, see: https://www.ibanet.org/MediaHandler?id=cd8525a1-8275-4763-859e-4374ba9516e2

However, the MFC has itself recognised many of these issues and is working to address them. It has a new secretariat, Executive Group members and better online presence.[147] Although the Consultative Network is still sceptical and its engagement with the MFC hangs in the balance, nevertheless they say *"we've decided it's worth engaging with for now. We want to act together."* The High Level Panel is also looking for a reset and for real action on its recommendations and advice to the MFC, yet is still engaged and has committed itself to the MFC for another two years.

The 2021 Nobel Peace Prize for two journalists (Maria Ressa and Dmitri Muratov) represents a boost for the cause of media freedom in the eyes of many. For example, a source from the High Level Panel said "*The Nobel prize should be a real push for the Coalition. It's a great signal to the world.*"

We also detect renewed interest as the MFC members plan for their next Global Conference and Ministerial meeting in Estonia in February 2022. Further, we spoke to several UK embassies who wanted to keep the momentum going, in the near future, despite the UK standing down as a co-chair at the end of 2021. One UK Ambassador said: *"We should use this Coalition as a brand more. It can create momentum and visibility… I've suggested this to some of the ambassadors I've been meeting, so if we all used the MFC brand then it becomes more powerful and more recognisable*."

We encourage the MFC to reflect on the findings of this report and incorporate our recommendations in its future plans and strategies order to strengthen the Coalition's work moving forward.

[147] Media Freedom Coalition, see website: https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/; See Tweet by Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Twitter, December 2021, https://twitter.com/tariqahmadbt/status/1474122616810221575

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Disclaimer: The FPC did not participate in, or contribute to, the evaluation of the MFC. The views expressed in this publication are therefore those of the individual authors alone and do not represent those of the FPC.

Annex: Case Studies - MFC on the Ground in Sudan and the Philippines



Case Study: Sudan[148]

This case study reviews aspects of the MFC that were implemented in the Republic of Sudan in 2019-2020, particularly the UNESCO 'Roadmap for Media Reform' and other donor-backed efforts to support independent media.[149]

Our case study asks:

- What difference, if any, did Sudan's membership of the MFC make to its commitment to media freedom manifested on the ground'?
- What role has the MFC, and other international efforts – especially those by the UK Embassy and UNESCO – played in helping to support and reform independent media in Sudan?

Between August 2020 and April 2021 we conducted 35 interviews with journalists, transitional government officials, representatives of local and international NGOs, and embassy officials in Khartoum.

Following Sudan's 'popular revolution', which began in December 2018 and the resulting fall of the dictatorship of Al-Bashir in 2019, Sudanese journalists enjoyed freedoms many had never experienced in their lifetimes. Just a month after the MFC was launched, newly appointed civilian Prime Minister, Abdalla Hamdok, travelled to the UN General Assembly in September 2019, signed

[148] Image by Abbasher under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)
A more detailed report about media freedom in Sudan by Mary Myers and Lina Yassin is to be published by the Center for International Media Assistance in early 2022.
[149] UN Sudan, 2020 Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan, September 2020, https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Media%20Reform%20Roadmap%20for%20Sudan.pdf

the MFC Pledge and declared that *"no journalists in the new Sudan would be repressed or imprisoned."*[150]

Systematic censorship of news reports stopped and raids on media houses came to a halt. The arrest and detention of journalists, once commonplace, became rare, and the harassment of online activists by pro-government trolls eased. Sudan's RSF score rose by 16 points in early 2021.

That is, journalists enjoyed those freedoms at least until October 2021, when Sudan's tenuous window for reform appears to have shut once more, when the military seized back power from the transitional government. Anti-coup protests were met with deadly response from soldiers, and the Government cut internet access and detained journalists along with civilian leaders of the transitional government. Government mechanisms of control over media were restored.[151]

Becoming a member of the MFC, in 2019, was one of several indications that Sudan's new government had been ready to engage with the international community after many years.

The UK Embassy had become the coordinator of the Media Reform Working Group Coordinator during this period of transitional government.[152] Media projects funded by this donor group included: strategic communications support to the Sudanese transitional government; training journalists and COVID messaging.

One of the most significant projects undertaken was UNESCO's 'roadmap' for media reform that would outline needed changes to the sector. The UK funded this initiative with approximately £150,000 (from FCDO funds allocated under the MFC) and UNESCO provided some of its own funding.

In February 2020 UNESCO released its Roadmap, which called on the Government to tackle 28 comprehensive 'action' items.[153] Among them were legal changes: replacing a 2009 press law that permitted prepublication censorship, passing a new broadcasting law to allow for the independent regulation of radio, and enacting regulations to allow transparency of media ownership and prevent excessive media concentration. Ambitiously, it called for most of these reforms to be completed by the end of 2022.

By mid-2021, it was still not clear how the Roadmap would be implemented and who the responsible entities in government were who would carry it out. Even before the October 2021 coup, personnel changes at Sudan's Ministry of Information and Culture raised questions as to how committed they were to the Roadmap.

Then, the October 2021 military takeover put these plans on hold indefinitely, as with almost all aid-funded efforts.

Lacking direction from the Sudanese Government, or a solid civil-society base on which to build more independent journalism, media assistance efforts by western donors during this transitional period were short-term and sometimes uncoordinated, many lacking involvement by any Sudanese entities. Despite forecasts by some interviewed for this report that donors would spend $5 million to $10 million on the Sudanese media sector in 2021, donors appeared to be mostly in a holding pattern

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[150] Dabanga, Sudan signs international undertaking for media freedom, September 2019, https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/sudan-signs-international-undertaking-for-media-freedom

[151] African Arguments, "Back to the former lies": Sudan reverts to media repression post-coup, December 2021, https://africanarguments.org/2021/12/back-to-the-former-lies-sudan-reverts-to-media-repression-post-coup/; BBC News, Sudan coup: Thousands protest on uprising anniversary, December 2021, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-59719765

[152] FCDO media freedom update to Foreign Affairs Committee, House of Commons, February 2021

[153] UN Sudan, 2020 Media Reform Roadmap for Sudan, September 2020, https://sudan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/Media%20Reform%20Roadmap%20for%20Sudan.pdf

due to instability in the Government – a position that looks prudent in light of the October 2021 coup.

The fact that Sudan signed up to the MFC helped make media reform a policy priority for the UK's FCDO in Khartoum, which would perhaps otherwise not have been the case. The MFC was, according to one British Embassy representative, the impetus for the UK taking the lead on media and convening the informal Sudan media donors' group.

At an early stage, there were high hopes that the MFC could have greater involvement in Sudan than was eventually the case. For example, the UK Embassy asked the MFC's High Level Panel to help with making recommendations for legal reform on media, but so far this has not happened, largely due to lack of engagement by the Sudanese Government.

But the view from the ground was that the MFC was largely irrelevant in terms of Sudan journalists' and media outlets' immediate needs, which struggled to survive day-to-day. Only eight interviewees out of the 25 Sudanese nationals in the media sector had ever heard of the MFC and only five had participated in the UNESCO Roadmap process. Some media rights activists and journalists who had heard of the MFC were cautiously positive:

"The Coalition has the potential to positively impact media freedom in Sudan."

But they were outnumbered by those expressing scepticism:

"I don't have trust in this initiative… it will remain on paper and that's because even if the laws are reformed and changed, the army will not follow it."

"I believe that [Hamdok signing the MFC pledge] is window-dressing and that government mostly cares about their international image."

Much of what was – and still is – needed in Sudan is structural in nature and goes beyond any roadmap so far put forward – such as the need to build stronger supportive institutions; to change the incentive system that creates self-censorship; and to build greater broad-based political will to enact the reform priorities.

Many of our interviewees noted that a true bottom-up approach, with the involvement of local Sudanese grassroots media and media-support organisations, had been missing. In the words of one representative of an international media NGO (a Sudanese national):

"For now we haven't seen many local organisations being invited to the table…"

Meanwhile, individual journalists are still in danger in Sudan and the situation at time of writing (January 2022) is worrying. Al Jazeera has been suspended, and some of the journalists we interviewed last year have fled into exile and others have been arrested or kidnapped and threatened.

Although we do not know what has been said privately since the October 2021 coup, the MFC has not made a public statement on Sudan or stated whether Sudan is still a member. The UK Embassy tweeted (in Arabic) saying that as founding members of the MFC, they're concerned about the safety of Sudanese journalists.[154] However, journalists have expressed their disappointment about the lack of action by the MFC.

[154] UK in Sudan, Twitter post, Twitter, January 2022, https://twitter.com/UKinSudan/status/1483000784459649029?t=BxTPmVW6vQC2g-nwcvKRkg&s=19

"There is no such thing as media freedom in Sudan right now. Why is the MFC not talking about this? These international pledges will always just remain words on paper without any real impact", said one journalist we interviewed after the October 2021 coup.



Case Study: The Philippines[155]

This case study reviews the implementation of the MFC in the Philippines by the British Embassy Manila and its partners from 2019 to early 2021, in the context of the broader media freedom landscape on the ground. Our evaluation of the MFC's impact in the Philippines involved in-depth interviews with 30 respondents conducted from August 2020 to April 2021, of which half were directly affiliated with the UK's Campaign and/or the MFC, while the rest were local journalists, donors, embassy representatives, and INGOs, as well as one Philippine senior government official.

The review asks:

- How does the UK-implemented aspects of the MFC frame challenges to media freedom in the Philippines, and how are activities designed to address these issues?
- Based on available evidence, how can we understand the performance of the MFC against its intended outcomes?

The Philippine case provides early evidence of how a global multilateral advocacy campaign gets translated at country level. In light of the delicate balancing-act for diplomatic missions operating in the Philippines, the MFC's implicit theory-of-change shifted to cover not only media protection, which can be perceived as antagonistic to host governments, but also media responsibility.

The Philippines has been a country of interest for the UK's Campaign and the MFC from the very beginning, as media freedom and press safety are enduring issues in the Philippines despite assumptions of having the 'liveliest and freest press in Asia' (although, it should be noted that the Philippines is *not* a member of the Coalition).

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[155] Image by Sikarin Thanachaiary under (CC - https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/2.0/)
This is a summary of a more detailed evaluation of this Philippines case by Maria Carmen (Ica) Fernandez (2021) 'Reviewing the Global Campaign for Media Freedom in the Philippines', see: www.pressfreedom.co.uk

At least 234 Filipino journalists have been killed since the 1986 People Power Revolution. It now ranks 138th out of 180 countries in RSF's 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Tensions are perceived to have intensified with Rodrigo Duterte's rise to the presidency in 2016. As of May 2021, 223 cases of attacks and threats against Filipino press workers were recorded since the start of the Duterte Administration. Of this number, half are linked to state forces; 19 have been killed. The extensive use of social media troll armies by political actors has led to the Philippines being tagged the 'patient zero' of the global disinformation crisis, a state that has intensified with pandemic-related mobility restrictions.

The Philippine Government strongly rejects the narrative of state suppression of press freedom, and frames media safety as a predominantly industrial issue related to journalist integrity and labour rights. This is further compounded by a culture of corruption, patronage, and impunity at the local government level. The Philippines was the first country to act on the 2012 United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, by creating a domestic Philippine Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists (PPASJ). But, while the multi-stakeholder consultations and drafting of the PPASJ was led by journalists and local media freedom NGOs, the Government's official endorsement of the Plan and public citation thereof is generally perceived as part of state efforts to improve the Philippines' image internationally.

The MFC launch at the inaugural Global Media Freedom Conference in London 2019 prominently highlighted the case of embattled Filipino journalist Maria Ressa (later named Nobel laureate), partly due to the role of Ressa's legal counsel and then-UK Special Envoy for Media Freedom Amal Clooney. In July 2020, the MFC issued a statement of concern regarding growing restrictions on journalists in the country, and the FCDO highlights the Philippines as a country of concern in many of its issuances, including MFC-related reports to the House of Commons.

Beyond conferences and statements at the global level, the UK Government also implemented local activities building on the British Embassy Manila's existing human rights and governance portfolio. The UK's media freedom activities in the Philippines cover three components: i) public-facing advocacy events; ii) dialogues and public and private diplomacy, including closed-door meetings with officials and players in the media sector; and iii) the provision of small grants to selected media NGOs. With a significantly smaller footprint compared to other bilateral and multilateral partners operating in the Philippines, the UK's mix of direct grants and diplomatic strategies reflects the difficult balancing act faced by international actors dealing with the administration led by President Duterte, who has been under scrutiny by the United Nations and the International Criminal Court due to human rights violations dating back to 2011 and earlier.

The consensus amongst respondents to our research is that the MFC and the local initiatives implemented by the British Embassy in the Philippines are relevant and timely. Interviews with bilateral and multilateral partners describe the UK's Campaign and the Coalition as a welcome additional mechanism to strengthen pre-existing structures for monitoring and financing. According to Filipino journalists and media workers, Embassy and FCDO statements of support to Maria Ressa are generally the most visible, with some awareness of small group discussions and embassy receptions among the diplomatic set. The public statements issued by the Coalition, and separately by the British Government and the Canadian Foreign Ministry, were positively received and reportedly helped with morale among media workers.

"For an important embassy to lead activities and make pronouncements and uphold media freedom… in another time and context it would just be lip service", noted a senior investigative reporter, *"but in the current time it's very important."*[156]

[156] Interview, 6 October 2020.

It was also observed that Regional Trial Court judges handling cases such as that of Maria Ressa and Rey Santos were more careful knowing that diplomats from the UK, Canada, Australia, Belgium, France, and the European Delegation were observing proceedings, either on Zoom during the lockdowns or onsite prior to the start of COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2021.

However, it is unclear if issuances such as the MFC joint statement on the Philippines, which are designed to push for more government accountability, have actually contributed to this desired outcome. The problem remains the disconnect between the state's reading of the current media freedom situation and that of civil society, and resulting adversarial relationships. The speed of judicial action on media killings remains glacial.

"It's time to go beyond more seminars and into more accountability", said one respondent frustrated with the lack of judicial action on media killings. Another senior diplomat remarked: *"We don't need more meetings, we need more action."*

Very few local journalists and human rights workers are aware of the Coalition or the UK's Campaign on Media Freedom, much less the small grants provided by the UK Embassy. Although UNESCO has been a long-term presence in the sector, the UNESCO-administered Global Media Defence Fund is not popularly known — a surprising situation in a small cash-strapped sector often dependent on external grants. The UK Embassy is aware of these limitations; nevertheless it has been able to maximise reach and relevance despite modest resources. The resulting portfolio — a product of consultations and listening processes — strategically engages academic partners for public advocacy, while using the small grants for quiet support to a handful of local media NGOs. While these grants are too small to cover operating expenses, they provide a degree of flexibility not possible with other donors with structured documentation requirements.

In this light, we conclude that the UK-implemented activities in the Philippines generally fulfilled its functions – despite pandemic-related restrictions – but only as a *pilot* diplomacy campaign. Sustained and substantial effectiveness will depend on how the MFC and the British Embassy in Manila under the new FCDO will decide on what constitutes 'effectiveness' and how it should be measured. While the MFC helped the Embassy direct attention and secure dedicated, if modest, resources to the media freedom issue, support to Philippine media during the period would likely to have happened anyway even without the MFC, given the country's human rights context.

The next phase of the support to media freedom by the UK in the context of the MFC is unclear with aid cuts, the transition of the FCO into the new FCDO, as well as the shift of leadership of the Coalition to the Netherlands and Canada. Nevertheless, the UK's MFC-related operations highlights a 'soft', media-responsibility oriented approach to human rights issues, as opposed to the 'hard' path taken in countries where the new Magnitsky-style sanctions regime has been applied, namely Russia, Saudi Arabia, Myanmar, North Korea, and Belarus. Results of the Embassy's monitoring and accompaniment are promising, and if used strategically and in coordination with other players, can assert positive pressure in the space. Translating the MFC on the ground also creates opportunities for collaboration amongst diplomatic posts in Manila and stakeholders across the region. However, not all Coalition members have media freedom projects in the Philippines, and no Southeast Asian nation is currently part of the coalition.

Continuing a diplomacy-heavy, grant-light approach also has at least two potential challenges. First, operations are heavily personnel-driven and therefore depends on the strength and relational capacity of diplomatic staff to navigate these issues. For example, Ambassador Pruce's journalism and media background was often cited in public engagements and was a useful basis for dialogue. Second, the perceived privileging of 'figureheads' who may not necessarily represent local realities outside Metro Manila and/or elite circles of power, can not only have unintended consequences for these actors, but may also be seen as divisive within the wider media industry. For instance, Filipino

respondents remarked that the focus on Maria Ressa as an individual contrasts heavily with the general lack of support for other embattled but less high-profile media workers. *"You won't see similar support for local human rights defenders",* one civil society worker noted.

Given that few actors in Philippine media, even heads of major media organisations, have heard about the Coalition or the FCDO grants, this raises the question of how international frameworks of media freedom relate to local discourses, whether that of the host state or the local media industry, let alone among regular citizens who consume media on a daily basis. While the needs of regional and grassroots-level community journalists and associated industrial issues are mentioned in public statements, increased attention and actual inclusion in programming will be required to translate vision into action.