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Journalists' Views on International Media Freedom Campaigns: Empty Rhetoric or Strategic Narratives?

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What do journalists think of the international media freedom campaigns that aim to support them? How might their perspectives help us better understand the potential impacts of such initiatives? This article addresses these under-researched questions through interviews with 37 journalists in Sudan and the Philippines about their experiences with the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC), a group of 51 states collaborating to promote media freedom. We found that these journalists were largely unaware of the MFC and highly skeptical that it would make a difference. Surprisingly, however, most were supportive of its work. This was because they valued the "strategic narratives" it provided and the signals these sent to their political leaders, as well as the "morale boost" they

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gave journalists. These findings highlight the importance of strategic narratives as a key component of international advocacy and demonstrate that audiences do not necessarily have to agree with them to support them. The findings also highlight the challenges of evaluating international media freedom initiatives.

Keywords: media freedom, strategic narratives, Sudan, the Philippines, international advocacy

Around the world, media freedom is in sharp decline. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of countries with a "good" press freedom situation declined by 69%—from 26 to just eight countries, according to Reporters Without Borders (RSF, 2024). Similarly, a study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2021) found that between 2016 and 2021, 85% of the world's population experienced a decline in press freedom in their country.

In response, several new intergovernmental initiatives supporting media freedom have been established. Major examples include the International Partnership for Information and Democracy and the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC). The MFC, which is the focus of this study, is a partnership of 51 governments working collaboratively to promote media freedom through advocacy, diplomatic interventions, international events, and funding. It was established by the United Kingdom and Canada in 2019.

While these multilateral diplomatic initiatives have been broadly welcomed by the international media development community, they have also been criticized for failing to "turn words into action" (Society of Editors, 2020, para. 1). Between 2010 and 2019, just 0.3% of official development assistance was spent on media support (Myers & Gilberds, 2024). In our previous research, we argued that, in its first two years, the MFC adopted a "resource light" and diplomatic approach to supporting media freedom, focused largely on protecting individual journalists from physical and legal attacks by state authorities (Scott, Bunce, Myers, & Fernandez, 2023, p. 87).

International civil society organizations also frequently encourage the MFC to take "stronger and more concrete actions to defend media freedom" (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2022, para. 1) rather than just releasing public statements. For example, in December 2023, the MFC published a statement "express[ing] their concern" about the plight of journalists in Israel and Gaza (MFC, 2023, para. 1). However, they were accused by a coalition of 42 media freedom and journalist organizations of taking "no credible action . . . to protect journalists in Gaza" (Public Media Alliance, 2024, para. 1).

But what do the journalists who are supposed to benefit from international media freedom campaigns think of them? Their voices are often missing from debates about the design, focus, and effectiveness of such initiatives. This absence is highly problematic because media support initiatives are more effective when they fully engage with the views, cultures, and priorities of the stakeholders they seek to assist. Historically, attempts to support media freedom have often been closely tied to the self-interest

of the states initiating them. Hence, it is crucial to re-center the views of journalists in our understanding of international media freedom campaigns.

In this article, we address this by examining what journalists thought about the MFC and its work during its first two years. Previous studies have frequently regarded international media freedom campaigns as ineffective because declines in media freedom often continue unabated. We argue that the concept of "strategic narratives" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2017) provides a more nuanced framework for understanding the aims and potential impacts of these initiatives and interpreting journalists' perspectives on them. Next, we detail the interviews conducted with 37 journalists in Sudan and the Philippines (2020–2021) and 50 wider stakeholders in these two countries. Our analysis reveals that these journalists were largely unaware of the MFC's existence, and when it was explained, they remained highly skeptical of its ability to impact media freedom in their country. However, despite their skepticism, most were still very supportive of the MFC's approach because they valued the "strategic narratives" it produced. Journalists in both countries felt that the MFC could emphasize the value of media freedom to their respective governments far more effectively than domestic actors. They also described the MFC as providing an important "morale boost" because it described threats to their work as worthy of international condemnation.

This article makes three major contributions. First, it provides rare empirical data about how journalists perceive international media freedom campaigns. This can help to ensure that such campaigns are better designed and evaluated in the future. Second, it is the first to describe and analyze media freedom campaigns as a form of "strategic narrative." This is an important theoretical development because we demonstrate that this analytical approach provides a valuable lens for explaining the interactions between the activities of elites on the international stage and their interpretation by local practitioners. This conceptual framework also helps us identify several potential unintended consequences associated with international advocacy campaigns. Finally, this study contributes to the growing literature on strategic narratives by showing that audiences can support strategic narratives without necessarily agreeing with their content.

International Media Freedom Campaigns as Empty Rhetoric

Previous studies of international advocacy campaigns frequently highlight their apparent failure to drive concrete improvements on the ground. For example, the tactic of naming and shaming governments that violate the rights of their citizens—which the MFC practices via its public statements—is often regarded as likely to have a limited impact. Terman (2023), for example, shows that, in many cases, international condemnation from the international community "not only fails to induce compliance but also incites a backlash, provoking resistance and worsening human rights practices" (p. 1).

In the field of international relations more generally, it is regularly observed that an "implementation gap" exists between states' public commitments to international norms and their actual policies and actions (Risse & Sikkink, 2013). This "gap" is often attributed to a lack of associated enforcement mechanisms. Local civil society actors are understood to be vital for "translating" international norms into domestic contexts and for helping to promote their enforcement by pressuring states to fulfill

their commitments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, such advocacy is usually extremely challenging because of a lack of political will and/or state capacity (Risse & Sikkink, 2013). Unfortunately, it is not clear how well this approach applies to international advocacy for media freedom because international relations scholarship "makes scant reference to . . . journalists," and when it does, refers to them simply as "something to be harnessed by CSOs and NGOs" (Mitchell, 2025, p. 32), rather than as a unique feature of civil society facing distinct threats and requiring particular protections.

Media studies has a substantial body of work on threats to media freedom, often informed by journalists' views and experiences. For example, the increased violations of press freedom during the Duterte government in the Philippines (2016–2022) have been well documented. This includes Bagalawis, Villanueva, and Katigbak's (2024) interviews with journalists that highlight how various forms of government attacks combined with COVID-19 restrictions trigger multiple forms of fear among journalists. Similarly, in Sudan, high levels of journalistic censorship and self-censorship—stemming from "restrictive laws, [and] economic pressures" (Hamid & Ramdani, 2020, p. 1536) during the regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989–2019)—are well established. However, journalists' experiences after the fall of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, both during Sudan's transitional government and since the start of Sudan's civil war in April 2023, have been less well documented.

Unfortunately, within this work, the role of international media freedom campaigns is often either overlooked or seen as a minor component of wider journalistic protection strategies. For example, in the studies of Sudan and the Philippines discussed above, the only mention of international advocacy is a reference by Bagalawis et al. (2024) to changes in RSF's ranking of the Philippines in its annual World Press Freedom Index. Furthermore, Lamer (2018) argues that, despite the best efforts of organizations like RSF, the impact of the advocacy efforts of international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) on media freedom's status as an institutional norm "seems . . . limited" because of their relatively limited financial and human resources (p. 115).

A few studies of international media campaigns have drawn on journalistic testimonies. For example, in her study of journalists' responses to attacks against them in Mexico and Honduras, Mitchell (2025) finds that most journalists valued the international strategies employed on their behalf either because they provided a "source of solidarity and hope" or because they "provided additional avenues for exerting pressure on the state" (p. 139). However, she also documents a widespread "disillusionment" and belief that they ultimately "had little impact" because international strategies are "unlikely to generate genuine political will on the part of governments where it does not already exist" (Mitchell, 2025, p. 153). Similarly, in their study of responses to anti-press violence in Mexico, Relly and González de Bustamante (2017) found that while transnational and domestic organizational networks can work together to "exert continuous pressure for institutional change," it is "unclear" whether this has influenced the political will or budgetary support required to actively support media freedom (p. 135).

As these examples illustrate, the existing literature focuses heavily on Latin American contexts, especially Mexico, and on the (in)effectiveness of international advocacy in general, rather than on the outcomes of specific initiatives. Furthermore, they tend to assume that unless "norms adopted . . . on paper . . . lead to concrete improvements in freedom of expression and journalists' safety," then

international media freedom campaigns have "had little impact" (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2017, p. 138). In the following section, we argue that the concept of "strategic narratives" provides an alternative lens for understanding international media freedom campaigns and interpreting journalists' perspectives.

International Media Freedom Campaigns as Strategic Narratives

Constructivist approaches to international relations recognize the critical role of ideas and language in shaping international affairs, and a growing scholarship describes the importance of "strategic narratives" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2014; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin, 2014). Strategic narratives are "a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors'" (Miskimmon et al., 2017, p. 6). The accuracy of strategic narratives is not necessarily relevant; what matters is the appeal they have to particular audiences and how their representation of issues shapes practice (Schmitt, 2018). Narratives become "strategic" when state and nonstate actors create and promote them to serve their interests, providing "plots for political action" (Miskimmon et al., 2014). One widely discussed example of an influential strategic narrative is the construction of al-Qaeda in the context of the "War on Terror." As Lerner and O'Loughlin (2023) explain, in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration's narratives represented the group as a coherent international actor sponsored by the state of Afghanistan (p. 6). This framed Afghanistan as the embodiment of the group against whom the U.S.-led coalition could then wage a "War on Terror." Alternative narratives would have legitimized very different policy responses.

Roselle et al. (2014) propose three overlapping types of strategic narratives: (1) those that set out why a policy is needed and desirable and how it will be successfully implemented, (2) narratives that tell the story of the nation-state and its goals, and (3) international system narratives that describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. Our previous research has described the dominant narratives contained within and promoted by the MFC in its first two years (Scott et al., 2023). These narratives relate to all three of Roselle et al.'s (2014) categories. First, the MFC diagnosed "the problem" as declining media freedom globally and "the culprit" as authoritarian states (rather than threats from large platform companies, for example). This state-centric narrative created a "plot" that legitimized a narrow, reactive, and "resource-light" approach to supporting media freedom, focused on diplomatic efforts targeting countries outside the Coalition (Scott et al., 2023). Second, the MFC told a national story for its member states, narrating them as exemplars of media freedom, democracy, human rights, and democracy defenders. For example, in 2021, then UK Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab (2021) described being cochair of the MFC as helping the UK to "play . . . a critical role as a champion of open, democratic societies, human rights and the rule of law" (para. 2). This was a strategically useful narrative for the UK during the first Trump presidency and in a post-Brexit world. Third, the MFC offered International System Narratives that distinguished between increasingly powerful, rule-breaking, authoritarian countries responsible for a decline in the rules-based international order and democratic, rule-abiding countries seeking to stop them.

Strategic narratives are related to the concept of social norms. However, there are important differences. Norms are shared understandings of appropriate behavior, grounded in shared ontological commitments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). Strategic narratives, by contrast, can "speak to the very

elements included in international political discourses, providing a basis upon which normative assessments can be made" (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5). For example, while a social norm might denote that a "good" democratic state will not attack or arbitrarily detain journalists, a strategic narrative can contain positions on more fundamental questions such as: "who is a journalist?" "what is freedom?" and "who are the champions of journalistic freedom?" For example, Palmer (2021) has shown that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital discourses of three international media freedom organizations "remained remarkably silent on press freedom violations happening within the nations where they are based, while representing nations outside the West as the central places in which press freedom was under brutal attack" (p. 95). In doing so, they told a clear story about which countries are seen as media freedom champions.

Lerner and O'Loughlin (2023) add that strategic narratives can also be "ontologically productive" because they can change how actors see the international system in ways that prevail beyond a single issue or context (p. 11). This happens when a strategic narrative contains "novel elements," which are then adopted by other actors. The authors give an example of how the concept of "war reparations" changed in the wake of World War II. Previously, reparations were seen as a form of "victor's justice" where the losing party was meant to repay the costs of the war. In the 1950s, however, they became understood as a form of compensation for human rights abuses and an element of international reconciliation. This happened because of the "ontologically productive" debates surrounding the Luxembourg Reparations Agreement in 1952. Although these debates happened in a specific context, they impacted broader understandings of state responsibility (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023). The MFC's strategic narratives also contain "novel elements" that may potentially be "ontologically productive," such as the idea that states are morally obliged to publicly condemn countries that violate media freedom.

While there is a large and growing body of literature on the role of strategic narratives within international relations, there is limited research on their reception. Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) characterize the existing research as "agent centric" because it focuses primarily on actors who make and disseminate strategic narratives (p. 418). Schmitt's (2018) study of the reception of Russian strategic narratives in France is one exception. He finds that strategic narratives are more likely to be accepted by an audience when they resonate with their local political myths.

Studying Sudanese and Filipino journalists' perceptions of the MFC in 2020 and 2021 will generate further useful insights into the reception of strategic narratives because both countries were a key focus of the MFC—albeit for very different reasons. At the time, Sudan had a transitional government comprised of both civilian and military representatives, and media reform was a key component of the country's tentative democratic transition. Sudan's transitional constitution included provisions guaranteeing freedom of the press, and in 2020, Sudan rose 16 places on RSF's World Press Freedom Rankings—to 159th out of 180 (RSF, 2020). In this context, Sudan's membership in the MFC was seen as a reward for the government's apparent commitment to media freedom and as an incentive for further reforms. In 2020, Sudan also received financial support from the British Embassy as part of its commitment to the MFC to help develop a UNESCO-led "Media Reform Roadmap."

In contrast, in 2019–2021, the Philippines experienced a decline in media freedom. It dropped two places to 136th in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Rankings (RSF, 2020). Then-President Rodrigo Duterte

had a well-documented antagonistic approach to independent journalism, which fueled a broader climate of harassment and intimidation of journalists. In this context, the MFC felt that international pressure could help prevent further declines in media freedom. In July 2020, the MFC published a joint statement expressing "concern" about "the increasing restrictions on freedom of the press in the Philippines" (MFC, 2020, para. 1). MFC members also engaged government and civil society organizations in support of a "National Action Plan on Media Freedom." The Philippines was not a member of the MFC. Thus, Sudanese and Filipino journalists' perspectives on the MFC can help us understand the reception of contrasting approaches taken by the same international media freedom campaign.

Methodology

We conducted semistructured interviews with 37 journalists—17 in Sudan and 20 in the Philippines—to understand their views on the MFC during its first two years (2019–2021). Table 1 provides details of their seniority, gender, geographic focus, and the primary medium of the news outlets they worked for. In both countries, respondents were purposefully targeted to include senior individuals currently or recently employed as professional journalists by the most influential public/state and private media, both nationally and locally.

To contextualize our interviews with journalists, we also conducted 50 further interviews with a wider range of stakeholders in Sudan (20) and the Philippines (30). Table 2 provides further details of the types of organizations these interviewees worked for and their gender. In Sudan, we purposefully selected individuals who were closely associated with national media reform at the time, regardless of their affiliation with the MFC. In the Philippines, half of the respondents were targeted because they were directly affiliated with the MFC and its activities. The other half were targeted because they were directly involved in international media support in general. Interviews with both sets of respondents in Sudan were conducted in either Arabic (16) or English (21) and occurred either in person, in Khartoum (19), or via phone calls (18). In the Philippines, all interviews took place via online calls and were conducted in either English or mixed Filipino and English.

Table 1. The Profile of Journalists Interviewed in Sudan and the Philippines.

	Sudan	The Philippines
News medium	Print (6) Television (3) Radio (1) Digital (1) Freelancers/other (6)	Print (9) Television (9) Digital (2)
Geographic focus	International (2) National (13) Local/community (2)	National (16) Local/community (4)
Seniority	Director/senior editor (6) Journalists (11)	Director/senior editor (8) Journalists (12)
Gender	Female (4) Male (13)	Female (11) Male (9)

Table 2. The Profile of Additional Stakeholders Interviewed in Sudan and the Philippines.

	Sudan	The Philippines
Professional affiliation	International NGO (8) National civil society organization (6) Foreign embassy (3) Multilateral organization (2) Transitional government (1)	National civil society organization (12) International NGO (4) University (4) Foreign embassy (8) Multilateral organization (1) Government (1)
Gender	Female (10) Male (10)	Female (17) Male (13)

All interviews were conducted between August 2020 and April 2021 and lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. The respondents were recruited via direct approaches and our existing professional networks. The semistructured interviews asked respondents questions about their understandings of media freedom, experiences of national and international support for media freedom, awareness of and engagement with the MFC, and perceptions of its likely impact. Confidentiality was assured for all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from City St George's, University of London. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English.

Informed by constructivist grounded theory, we analyzed our data via a two-phase process (see Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding involved a segment-by-segment reading of interview transcripts to identify provisional themes. Subsequently, our focused coding involved consolidating and prioritizing the most significant codes to identify the most salient themes. Throughout, memo-writing and regular discussions within the research team helped to identify patterns in our data (see Charmaz, 2014).

Findings

Had Journalists Heard of the MFC?

There were relatively low levels of awareness of the MFC among journalists in both countries. In the Philippines, only two of the 20 journalists we interviewed (10%) were aware of the MFC, and none were familiar with its public statement expressing concern about the decline in media freedom there (MFC, 2020). Although some journalists were aware of the specific activities carried out by the embassies of MFC member states, they did not associate these activities with the MFC. Awareness of the MFC was also extremely limited among the wider set of stakeholders we interviewed, who were not directly affiliated with the MFC. As a representative of one multilateral organization asked, "who are these Coalition [members]? . . . I don't know if they have any kind of activities . . . They haven't approached us" (P24). Even those who were aware of the MFC felt it was largely unknown. As one civil society representative put it, "I think I recall I came across it, but it's not seen as this global campaign . . . I don't know [if] I would call it a brand" (P21).

The MFC made some efforts to consult relevant stakeholders in the Philippines. In particular, the UK embassy held multiple private meetings and discussions with journalists, government officials, media freedom organizations, and businesses around the country in early 2020. Indeed, one journalist who was

aware of the MFC told us they learned about it via "gatherings in the ambassador's residence" (P14). The UK embassy also hosted roundtable discussions involving different stakeholders and partnered with local universities to run public events. However, these actions were not sustained, and a few other embassies involved in the MFC took such actions.

In Sudan, awareness of the MFC was also low. Only four of the 17 journalists (24%) had heard of the MFC and were aware that Sudan was a member. Furthermore, these four journalists said that the information they had about it was fleeting and vague and came almost exclusively from the Sudanese government. As one journalist put it, "I am the editor of one of the biggest papers in the country, but I have [been given] no information about this. No communication at all" (S5). Another said that they had "heard that the prime minister has signed an agreement [to join the MFC], but . . . I did not get the information as a journalist" (S9).

Although few had heard of the MFC itself, all except one of the Sudanese journalists had heard of the Media Reform Roadmap, which had been supported by the UK as part of its MFC commitments. This roadmap had been developed via a multistakeholder reform process, involving 13 workshops, 66 expert meetings, and a 200-person working group. Indeed, several civil society representatives who participated in this process described it as "useful" (S26), "ambitious" (S22), and "inclusive in some aspects, because it engages the post-revolution government, and the Sudanese Journalists Network" (S29). However, others expressed reservations about the breadth and longevity of its consultations, characterizing it as "made in a hurry" (S28) and "a very nice document . . . [but] lacking in terms of actual ownership . . . and commitment to it" (S25).

Despite widespread awareness of the roadmap, few journalists associated it with the MFC. As one journalist told us, "I know for sure that the UK and Canada are on board in terms of media freedom. But I cannot confirm to you if [the roadmap] is under the MFC" (S2). In summary, despite some degree of outreach, journalists in Sudan and the Philippines were largely unaware of the MFC. In both countries, there also appears to have been relatively limited consultation with journalists on the design of the MFC's activities.

Perceptions of the MFC's Likely Impact

Journalists in Sudan and the Philippines were also very skeptical that the MFC would improve media freedom in their countries. However, this skepticism was largely because of their appreciation of the many other factors that shape media freedom, rather than direct criticisms of the MFC itself.

In Sudan, journalists told us that the MFC's likely success was determined by a wide range of factors well outside the MFC's control. As one journalist put it, "the international community can push as much as it wants but it's not in the hands of consultants" (S4). For example, interviewees consistently argued that the MFC would struggle to encourage the civilian government to prioritize the issue of media freedom at a time when it was facing many other significant challenges. One journalist told us,

> Since they've come to power, the transitional government have just been putting out fires—the economy, a cholera outbreak, the tribal conflict in eastern Sudan, the Covid-

> 19 emergency and now the floods, so they have not been able to prioritize . . . media freedom. (S7)

Furthermore, even if the civilian government did gain the political will necessary for improving media freedom, because of pressure from the MFC, its ability to implement legal and other reforms was significantly constrained. Journalists explained that the state was "not a magic apparatus that could do everything" (S12) because it was constrained by weak institutional capacity, former regime members opposed to reform, and political uncertainty. For example, several interviewees attributed the stalled implementation of the MFC-funded roadmap to a cabinet reshuffle and a subsequent change in the Minister of Information. Most significantly, though, interviewees stressed that, at the time, the transnational government was reluctant to pursue reforms to media freedom because this would either be blocked by or increase tensions with the military, with whom it was sharing power. As one journalist said,

> The military will always view the media as their enemy. So, if you are in a country where the military is . . . able to call the shots, you will never have free media. I don't care how many nice statements the prime minister makes. (S15)

This journalist went on to argue that the transnational government "are not trying to reform the media . . . because they are scared of the military, and they want to make sure that this partnership works out and that we can go through the transitional period without a coup" (S15).

Several Sudanese journalists also felt that the MFC's likely impact was constrained by the limited capacity of civil society organizations to hold the government accountable to its commitments as an MFC member. In this context, they blamed neither the government nor the MFC but the "weakness in the journalistic institutions" (S14) in Sudan. As one journalist put it, "there should be monitoring mechanisms from civil society to see if things are being implemented or not. It is not the prime minister's fault. It is the fault of the people who should be following up on this work" (S17). In doing so, they drew attention to various other forms of support required to improve media freedom in Sudan. This included journalistic capacity building through direct financial support and journalist training, as well as wider issues such as supporting media literacy, universal Internet access, updated university curricula, more female journalists in leadership roles, more evenly distributed government advertising, cheaper printing facilities, reduced concentration of ownership, and higher wages. As one journalist said, "if you can't earn your own bread, you can't decide for yourself" (S1). In this context, the MFC's interventions were seen as a "drop in the ocean" (S8) compared with what was required.

In the Philippines, most journalists were equally skeptical that the MFC would significantly influence the governments' actions. As one journalist said, "although now is the best time to be talking about media freedom as this is a [political] transition year . . . whether it will have an impact on the administration, I do not think so" (P6). The main reason given for this skepticism was the perception that President Duterte was not susceptible to diplomatic pressure. For example, a journalist told us that "the President does not really listen to anyone. He is 78 years old. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks" (P12). Another agreed, saying, "most likely, Duterte will simply, curse them" (P20). Similarly, one ambassador we interviewed said, "I'm sure they do huff and puff but . . . I can't readily think of an example where a statement from the Coalition

has provoked a negative reaction from the government here" (P32). Several journalists added that "with this type of government" (P15), international pressure would be significantly stronger if MFC statements were supported by enforcement mechanisms or "if sanctions were involved" (P15). However, not all journalists agreed. One told us that the MFC "will have a great impact . . . [because] it will irritate the President . . . Beyond that, it will make the government more cautious when attacking media because the eyes of the world are upon him" (P4).

Journalists in the Philippines also argued that media freedom was also constrained by many other (f)actors, which required different forms of support to address. One interviewee said, "it's not only Duterte's government that has caused the problems . . . It's the media moguls [and] some of their employment practices" (P31). Journalists highlighted the need for other initiatives to support "citizen journalism projects" (P9), "safety training" (P1), "networking opportunities" (P17), "legal support" (P2), "financing of regional outlets" (P14), and "educating the public" (P19). For this reason, the MFC was described as "a baby step" (P17) and as contributing "little by little" (P1) to supporting media freedom.

Did the Journalists Share the MFC's Understanding of Media Freedom?

As discussed earlier, the MFC adopted a narrow, absolute, negative, and state-centric understanding of media freedom in its first two years (see Scott et al., 2023). Our interviews show that this narrative contrasts starkly with the complex, dynamic, and contested understandings of media freedom held by journalists in Sudan and the Philippines.

In Sudan, nearly all journalists described media freedom as a relative freedom, believing that there were various legitimate limits to freedom of expression. As one journalist put it, "[my] freedom ends at the beginning of the other's freedom. You cannot abuse and harass others and think that this is a part of your freedom" (S5). The most often cited limits to media freedom related to defamation, "harming national security" (S14), and "being advocates for the previous regime" (S13). In contrast, in its public statements about Sudan and its wider work, the MFC never acknowledged such potential limits or recognized that such limits may vary for different contexts (see Myers et al., 2022). The roadmap, for example, referred only to its ambition to "align Sudan's media laws with international standards" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1), and its only reference to defamation laws noted its "misuse to suppress the reporting of news and opinion that is critical of the authorities" (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1).

Journalists in Sudan described the main threats to media freedom as coming from the state, but also economic factors, the military and security services, and especially the recently established disempowerment committee. This independent committee was responsible for purging Sudan of the remnants of the ousted regime but was accused by multiple respondents of arbitrarily arresting journalists and closing news outlets linked with the old regime. In contrast, the MFC consistently emphasized that governments were by far the greatest threat to media freedom. In the roadmap, there was no mention of the disempowerment committee and only one reference to the military and security services.

Interviewees in Sudan adopted both negative and positive understandings of media freedom, calling for a combination of interventions that would remove restrictions from journalists and build their

capacity and professionalism. By contrast, the MFC's discourse focused almost exclusively on negative freedom, particularly legal constraints and threats to journalists' safety. For example, the most widely publicized statement relating to Sudan's membership of the MFC was Prime Minister Hamdok's commitment to the UN General Assembly upon joining the MFC that "no journalists in the new Sudan will be subjected to repression or imprisonment" (IFEX, 2020, para. 2).

In the Philippines, the MFC also adopted a narrow approach to media freedom, focusing on legal threats to individual journalists. This was exemplified by its strong emphasis on supporting journalist Maria Ressa. Diplomats from multiple MFC member states observed her trial proceedings, and her case was explicitly raised in the MFC's joint statement. Ressa's legal team was also led by Amal Clooney, who was the United Kingdom's Special Envoy on Media Freedom and who had helped launch the MFC. According to several UK civil servants, Maria Ressa was "a priority case" (P33) because "she's very high profile" (P33) and her "link to Amal Clooney puts her in the UK Foreign Secretary's mind" (P34). There was also a widespread perception among MFC member states that "obviously the Maria Ressa case in particular kind of exemplifies all these . . . media freedom issues" (P40), as one diplomat put it. However, the journalists we interviewed highlighted a far wider range of threats to media freedom in the Philippines, including "failing business models" (P5), "corruption" (P7), "political disinformation" (P15), "red-tagging" (P15), "a dysfunctional justice system" (P19), "abductions" (P11), "intimidation" (P10), "impunity for crimes against journalists" (P9), "self-censorship" (P10), "extra judicial killings" (P3), "ownership by big business" (P10), "Duterte verbally attacking the media" (P3), "poor Internet connectivity" (P5), and "sexual harassment" (P3). As one journalist put it, "we have multiple layers of shit" (P18). Numerous interviewees also emphasized that the situation is "very different [for journalists] . . . living in provinces . . . as opposed to those in Metro Manila" (P3; see Khan, 2022). Thus, the MFC's understanding of media freedom differed from that of our interviewees in both countries.

Did Journalists Support the MFC?

Surprisingly, the journalists in our study still supported the MFC (once they learned of its work)—even though they did not necessarily agree with its narrative about media freedom and/or think it was likely to have an impact. This support was particularly strong in the Philippines, where almost all journalists were supportive of the MFC in principle, describing it as "very beneficial" (P20), "well appreciated" (P14), and "a much-welcome helping hand" (P2). Two reasons were consistently given for this. First, journalists appeared to be supportive of the principle of diplomatic and narrative intervention, which underpinned the MFC's approach. They understood the MFC's purpose as being to "reinforce the message that it is important to protect and promote press freedom" (P6) and to "be seen by the Philippine government as being heavily involved" (P18) in doing so. As one journalist explained, "our government will know that foreign institutions are watching over us, and have to deal with the press fairly, properly, because there's international pressure" (P19). Several journalists also felt that the alternative was much worse because if the MFC did not publicly condemn egregious violations of media freedom, this would further undermine the strength of media freedom as an international norm.

They also understood that while the MFC's statements were unlikely to have a direct and immediate impact on specific government actions, they could still, over time, contribute to broader changes

in state behavior. Journalists told us it could encourage the government to "start getting nervous" (P7), "think twice" (P16), "hold back" (P7), or become "more cautious . . . when attacking media" (P4). One diplomat we interviewed also explained that "it's not going to be a quick overnight win but if it can plant a few seeds and show people there is another way, maybe in a few years' time, you might see that change" (P32). For some, this supportive perspective was informed by previous experiences, most notably the belief that international pressure had, over time, contributed to investigations into the 2009 Ampatuan massacre in the Philippines, in which at least 34 journalists are known to have been killed. In addition, many journalists felt that by "supporting the narrative of media freedom" (P41), the MFC could have wider effects on public discourse about the media, which could contribute to increasing crowdfunding and building trust with sources, for example.

Second, journalists in the Philippines who were aware of the MFC regarded its "messages of support" (P7) as an important "morale booster" (P14), describing its public statements and limited consultation activities as helping them feel "hope" (P11), "solidarity" (P16), and "encouragement" (P14). As one journalist explained, "moral support is always welcome because at least we know we're not alone in this fight. It fuels our advocacy" (P8). Another said that "the hardest thing for any embattled sector is to feel that you are alone especially if you are up against the powers that be" (P13). Such feelings of support were felt especially keenly within newsrooms that had been named publicly in MFC statements of support. One such journalist told us, "it's like the Coalition is holding the sky, so that it will not fall onto us" (P11).

Journalists in the Philippines were particularly supportive of the international dimension of the MFC. We were repeatedly told that President Duterte's threatening and abusive language toward the media had helped create a "climate of fear" (P17) among journalists in the Philippines, which meant that "not too many organizations are willing to stand up for media freedom at this time" (P4). This reluctance for "[news] organizations to speak out publicly" (P13) was compounded by what multiple journalists described as the "Philippine media's highly competitive nature" (P13). Indeed, one journalist told us that they would be "reprimanded . . . [by their owners] if they see that you vocally support another [news outlet]" (P13). Given this "fear of backlash" (P7) within the Philippines, interviewees described it as "really very helpful to get supporters from the international community" (P7) because they can "bridge those visible and invisible barriers" (P18). Several journalists also emphasized the importance of governments providing support, arguing that "if you feel the presence of other people multilaterally—not just INGOs—but if governments are right there, throwing their hats in the ring, then that's a big deal" (P1).

In Sudan, once they had been made aware of the MFC's work, approximately two-thirds of the journalists were supportive of it in principle, describing it as potentially "useful" (S9), "a great support" (S6), and "very important" (S7). These journalists understood the MFC to operate by "putting pressure on the government to commit to what they have signed with regards to media freedom . . . [by showing that] the whole world was watching what was happening in Sudan" (S10). This approach was seen as particularly appropriate at the time because Prime Minister Hamdok and the Sudanese government in general were understood to be very keen to "impress the international community" (S16). As one civil society representative told us,

> I think the transitional government cares very much about what the international community think of them, so if they keep subtly or softly demanding media reform, the government will have to give in at some point and start a serious process of reform. (S21)

The Sudanese journalists we spoke to also regarded their government's desire to "impress the international community" (S16) as linked to its ambition to establish its democratic legitimacy. For example, one journalist described meeting the international community's democratic standards as "one of the main conditions to lift the name of Sudan from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism" (S6).

Given this general support for the MFC and for its underpinning theory of narrative-led change, many respondents did not voice objections to the relatively low levels of consultation, discussed earlier, and/or chose not to engage with the initiative—because they did not regard their involvement as necessary for its success, especially because they were very busy. As one journalist said, "I heard about the campaign, but I did not follow the details of what happened" (S14).

However, unlike in the Philippines, support for the MFC was not universal. Five of the 17 journalists we interviewed (29%) had concerns. Three were critical of the MFC for emphasizing international norms without any enforcement mechanisms, describing Sudan's MFC membership as "just ink on paper" (S3) and as being "for appearances only" (S12). Another objected, in principle, to the MFC working through government channels, rather than engaging with the journalists themselves directly. A fifth journalist told us that "we don't want to see some kind of colonialist approach where we see a new INGO just talking about what people on the ground know much better than they do" (S11).

The MFC: Empty Rhetoric, or Strategic Narratives?

In 2021, the MFC claimed to be "working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists, and hold[ing] to account those who harm journalists for doing their job" (MFC, 2022). Yet most of the journalists we spoke to in two countries prioritized by the MFC had never heard of it and felt it had little chance of success. Indeed, during its first two years, the MFC's existence could only really be discerned through its self-produced narratives in its international conferences, events, statements, meetings, and social media posts. These narratives were also very self-referential. Member states posted on social media about statements they had made relating to issues they had discussed in meetings with other member states.

In previous research, we have shown that the MFC's actions generated limited media coverage (aside from its opening conference) and allocated minimal financial resources to directly support media freedom (Myers et al., 2022). Given this, it appears that, during its first two years at least, the MFC existed primarily in the minds and actions of actors in Western capitals, rather than in the lived experiences of those it was designed to benefit in Sudan, the Philippines, and elsewhere. Several journalists in Sudan also reached this conclusion, describing the MFC as "just ink on paper" (S3).

Furthermore, in Sudan, numerous journalists pointed out that the celebrated claim made by Prime Minister Hamdok upon joining the MFC—that, in the future, no journalists would be repressed or jailed—was

demonstrably false, even during his own transitional government. In the Philippines, while the UK government claimed that "the British Embassy in Manila is leading the way in promoting media freedom in the country" (Foreign and Commonwealth Office [FCO], 2019, para. 25), our analysis shows that, at best, its actions made a marginal contribution to supporting other much larger and well-coordinated efforts at the time (Fernandez, 2022). These findings appear to mirror previous studies, which conclude that international media freedom campaigns are generally ineffective because they do not directly lead to concrete improvements for journalists (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2017).

However, this is not the whole story. Despite a general lack of awareness and engagement with the MFC and skepticism about its likely impacts in the short term, the journalists we interviewed, in both countries, were supportive of the MFC. This was primarily because they valued what they understood as its efforts to raise the salience of media freedom internationally, in a way that their governments were more likely to respond to (albeit over the longer term), compared with pressure from domestic actors. In other words, they supported the MFC because it offered valuable strategic narratives about their work, even if they did not use this exact term. This explains why most interviewees did not object to the MFC's relatively low levels of consultation: Because they did not regard their involvement as necessary for its success. Similarly, they did not object to the MFC adopting a very different view of media freedom to their own because they understood that its absolute, negative, and state-centric narrative about media freedom was likely to be more effective in influencing their government.

The journalists we interviewed were also supportive of the MFC because it offered what they described as an important "morale boost." This appeared to stem from the MFC's validation of the very idea of media freedom, or it's "willing[ness] to stand up for media freedom . . . [when] not too many organizations [were]" (P4), as one journalist put it. Put another way, the MFC's narratives appeared to provide "novel elements" that were strategically useful for journalists because they offered a "plot" in which their work was both at the heart of their national story and worthy of multilateral support (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5).

We do not yet know whether the MFC's strategic narratives will prove "ontologically productive"—that is, whether their novel elements will "alter dominant worldviews in ways that can potentially endure beyond the circumstances of their utterance" (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5). However, our research does show that, since power operates via narratives and ontological debates, international advocacy campaigns that are more style than substance should not necessarily be dismissed as "empty rhetoric." Furthermore, the testimonies of our interviewees suggest that practical interventions designed to directly assist journalists are not inherently more valuable than narrative/diplomatic interventions, as is often assumed by international civil society actors.

Our findings also indicate that strategic narratives do not necessarily require "translating" or acceptance by domestic civil society actors to function, as is often assumed in International Relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This is an important addition to the current literature on strategic narratives, which has only rarely examined how audiences become entangled in narratives they do not necessarily agree with—in the context of a wider, complex ecosystem involving the government, military, civil society, and other actors.

These conclusions raise three key challenges for the design and practice of media freedom campaigns. First, if international advocacy campaigns can legitimately claim to have an impact through their strategic narratives while hardly existing on the ground, with relatively low levels of in-country engagement and disconnected understandings of media freedom, it becomes almost impossible to hold them accountable to their commitments. For example, the MFC's lack of direct engagement with Sudanese journalists made it very difficult for them to pressure the MFC to take stronger action after Sudan's transitional government was replaced by the military in a coup in October 2021. It took 22 months from the military coup—and four months from the start of the civil war in April 2023—for Sudan to be expelled from the MFC. It is also extremely difficult to evaluate campaigns that overstate the significance of their work if such claims are themselves part of achieving impact and changing narratives. In this case, perhaps future evaluations of such initiatives should focus not just on establishing whether they are directly triggering immediate and concrete improvements on the ground, but also on questioning how their strategic narratives are formulated, who they influence and benefit, and who they might inadvertently harm. Moreover, this makes it extremely important for international media freedom campaigns to have a clear theory of change to guide their work.

Second, narrative interventions from international campaigns may be more likely to have adverse, unintended consequences if they are disconnected from the communities they aim to support. For example, by celebrating individual "heroes" or figureheads of media freedom, who might not necessarily represent local realities, strategic narratives may inadvertently promote divisiveness within the wider media industry or lead to these actors being stigmatized domestically (see Fernandez, 2022; Khan, 2022). Similarly, in Sudan, several of our interviewees who predicted the 2021 military coup argued that the transitional government at the time hesitated to advance substantive media reforms in the hope of maintaining the fragile partnership they had established with the military. It is vital that international advocacy campaigns take such insights into account to prevent strategic narratives from inadvertently doing more harm than good.

Finally, while the journalists we interviewed may have broadly welcomed the MFC's approach, Mitchell's (2025) recent work reminds us that the usefulness of international strategies to support journalists is heavily dependent on contextual factors including government type, time period, and levels of violence and impunity. Indeed, since Marcos Jr. became President of the Philippines in June 2022, the international community's support for media freedom has shifted away from a more confrontational naming-and-shaming approach toward more collaborative, technical-assistance-style initiatives. This appears to reflect changing geopolitical imperatives, whereby both the new Philippine government and donor governments benefit from the strategic narratives provided by a softer approach. Given this, it is a welcome development that, since 2021, the MFC's approach has evolved to include a much greater focus on actions taken by MFC member embassies, which can be more tailored to individual country contexts.

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