



30TH BSPC: SECOND SESSION

Democracy in a changing media landscape

Speaker: **Mr Erik Halkjaer**, President of the board of the Swedish section of
Reporters without borders

- reported speech -

Ms Stålhammar thanked Mr Nilov. She noted that some of these perspectives were seen differently, but it was always important to safeguard the freedom of expression. On that point, she introduced the representative from civil society. Since 2019, Mr Erik Halkjaer had been president of Reporters Without Borders in Sweden. Mr Halkjaer had about twenty years of experience of being a journalist and having worked for various written media in Sweden.

Speech by Erik Halkjaer, President of the Swedish Section of Reporters Without Borders

Mr Halkjaer thanked the BSPC for the invitation as well as Ms Cederfelt, Prof Hofmann and Mr Nilov as speakers before him. Their contributions had been interesting, he noted. Mr Halkjaer pointed out that he had addressed this forum in the spring, before the summer, although the audience might have been a little different. At that point, he had mentioned that press freedom was under pressure all over the world, including Europe and in the Baltic states. They were not free from this attack on press freedom, not even in this area. A quick look at the report by Reporters Without Borders, the Press Freedom Index, showed that – apart from Norway and Finland at the top -, Lithuania and Latvia were the only two countries showing something like improvement in terms of press freedom over the last few years. All the other countries, including Sweden, were going up and down the list. It was not looking that positive, in his estimation. All of them were facing great challenges in their respective countries.

He went on to point out that journalists were being killed, even within the European Union. That was horrendous, he underlined. Nevertheless, he considered the greatest threat they were facing in the EU and the Baltic states were harassment, threats and hate speech. These were generated both by state actors as well as private sector representatives, organised crime or common citizens. With the pandemic, there had been a rise of these threats. Journalists covering the pandemic or the regulations and methods used to inform or handle the spread of the virus had been suffering more threats and hate speech, or they might have been oppressed by the state or put in jail or forced to cover something else, such as sports or culture issues. The flow of disinformation had been increasing all over the world, including the Baltic Sea region. As Ms Cederfelt had said earlier, this was not a new occurrence. All the factors he had just mentioned were something that had always been there. But what the pandemic had brought about was something that the World Health Organization (WHO) called an “infodemic”: a worldwide spread of disinformation along with threats and harassments in the footsteps of the virus. All of this was much more than there had ever been before, because of the global digital platforms. He noted that this had been pointed out earlier by Prof Hofmann in particular. This development could be called a storm or a hurricane of disinformation, threats, harassments but also surveillance. This did not only concern journalists but most citizens.

At Reporters Without Borders, they had long advocated for more transparency towards these platforms, as Prof Hofmann had asked for earlier. For long, they had asked for more open algorithms and more transparency, to see why certain contents were promoted while others were blocked or even suppressed. His organisation had long advocated for more press freedom on the platforms so that journalists and journalistic

or media contents were boosted and that verified journalistic contents would be easily spread and shown on these platforms instead of contents and information from non-verified sources. More media plurality was needed on the media platforms. As a citizen, one could get a variety of information, from a lot of different sources. This, Mr Halkjaer underlined, was truly life-saving during a pandemic. That was necessary. As a citizen, one needed to be able to make their own decisions, to make up their own mind, with information from a variety of sources, with different angles and views. That was vital in stopping a pandemic. During the pandemic, the platforms had indeed been blocking and in some cases taking down misinformation – what was called “fake news”. The question, though, was what constituted fake news and who decided what was fake news.

Mr Halkjaer said that the methods employed by the platforms were okay but not unproblematic. At Reporters Without Borders, they would rather talk about carrots than sticks. Instead of blocking and erasing content, they would prefer if the platforms and digital outlets were spreading more information from verified journalistic sources to boost these sources. His organisation had even created a tool for this: the Journalism Trust Initiative which had been launched in the spring of 2021. That was a method for media outlets to certify journalism and show their audience how these worked, providing more transparency. Moreover, while they were asking the digital media platforms to be more transparent, they equally asked the journalistic content – the traditional media outlets – to be more transparent as to how they implemented their journalism. This concerned questions such as which sources they were using, how the sources had been acquired, how were the contents verified, who was paying for the contents and who were the owners of the outlets. With this certificate from the Journalism Trust Initiative, Reporters Without Borders was hoping that this could be used by the digital media platforms and by users to know that this was a trusted media outlets in contrast to another not verified source. Disinformation and fake news were best fought through journalism with verified sources, it was best fought with investment in journalism.

His organisation had also worked with an initiative called Information and Democracy. There, a large group of countries had been put together. Mr Halkjaer mentioned that all countries were of course welcome. They had created a forum for information and democracy. The idea behind it was to work together to find a way to make the internet more democratic – to make the digital platforms more democratic. As Jeanette Hofmann had said in her contribution, the goal was to make it easier to enforce and appeal to the platforms as a citizen.

Unfortunately, in a forum of parliamentarians from all countries around the Baltic Sea, Mr Halkjaer had to say that there were countries in this region who were not using what he had just described. Those nations were using another method, i.e., blocking, suppressing and making it harder for journalists to work. For example, there was Russia which had implemented a whole set of laws according to which journalists had to register as foreign agents or where the telephones one bought featured pre-installed software. It was illegal to spread false information – as had been discussed here. But the question was how to decide what such false information was. Russia was blocking sites, and platforms needed to block illegal content. This was interesting, Mr Halkjaer noted, because Prof Hofmann had also mentioned this as a German law. In his view,

this was a very sensitive issue because the question remained of who decided what was illegal and what had to be blocked. He said that this decision-making process had to follow the human rights and already existing laws. All of these methods, though, were highly sensitive, and he would be careful about using them. Instead, he preferred using the carrot, to work for more media plurality and create a state where there were more journalists who could work, where it was easier to verify who was a journalist. After all, there were tools to do so, such as the Journalism Trust Initiative. It should also be revealed what methods these journalists were using. All of that should be shown openly, instead of blocking and making it harder for different actors. In the end, one had to ask themselves who was deciding what was fake news, false information etc.

He went on to talk about the situation in Belarus which was deteriorating quickly and how Belarus was using disinformation in an information war against Lithuania. That affected the European Union and its citizens. Once again, Mr Halkjaer was getting calls from journalists, asking him how one could determine if something was verified content, dealing with information received from the border between Lithuania and Belarus. He could only answer that he didn't know but that the journalists had to check the sources. That was essential and a journalist's job. Where did the video come from? Who was behind it? Could the journalist verify the information from another source? These and more tasks along this line were crucial for journalists and had to be done.

He went on to describe the situation south of the Baltic, specifically in Poland where laws and media takeovers were used to diminish media plurality. Once again, he emphasised that this was not the way to create a democratic society. The recipe for fighting disinformation was with media plurality, journalism, transparency and press freedom. That was how one built a long-lasting, sustainable democracy, he concluded.