

UPF Europe Middle East: The Role of News Media in the Global COVID-19 Crisis

Yvo Bruffaerts
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The Webinar was hosted by the International Media Association for Peace (IMAP), a project of the Universal Peace Federation, and featured leading media professionals from our Region. The panellists were (click on the links for the individual speeches):

[Mrs. Cheryl Wetzstein, Senior Adviser, IMAP; former Washington Times National Reporter & Special Sections Manager, USA](#)

Mr. Humphrey Hawksley Author, former BBC correspondent and Asia Bureau Chief, United Kingdom

Mr. Willy Fautré, Director, Editor in Chief, Human Rights Without Frontiers (HRWF), Belgium

Dr. Rubina Möhring, President, Reporters Without Borders, Austria

The moderator was Mr. Peter Zöhrer, Coordinator, International Media Association for Peace, Europe and the Middle East.

[The concluding remarks were made by Mr. Jacques Marion, President, UPF Europe and the Middle East.](#)

A recording of the webinar can be found on the Peace Newsroom Channel at: youtu.be/fYn_44RAPLo

or on the UPF Europe and Middle East Vimeo Channel at: vimeo.com/427708565

or on the UPF Europe and Middle East YouTube Channel at: youtu.be/OscTV_n3Ygc



Mrs. Cheryl Wetzstein, Senior Advisor, International Media Association for Peace (IMAP); former National Reporter, The Washington Times, USA

Cheryl Wetzstein is an award-winning journalist with 40 years' experience, beginning as a metro reporter in New York City and then 33 years at The Washington Times. Her newsroom positions included feature writer, assistant business editor, biweekly columnist and national reporter in Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, and state legislatures. Later, on the Times' business side, she developed award-winning special sections, plus multiple sections around faith. She is currently Senior Advisor to the International Media Association for Peace.

Mrs. Cheryl Wetzstein is a senior advisor to IMAP, which was launched at the World Summit 2020 in South Korea. Co-sponsors were the Washington Times, the Segye Ilbo daily newspaper from South Korea and the Segye Nippo from Japan. The summit was led by Dr. Hak Ja Han Moon, who founded the Universal Peace Federation with her late husband the Reverend Sun Myung Moon. IMAP was launched on the foundation of the World Media Association, which was renowned for its international conferences on topics such as media ethics and the mission of the media. The association organized countless fact finding tours for journalists worldwide and in particular in trouble spots. Mrs. Wetzstein went on saying that IMAP's mission today is to provide leadership and networking opportunities to media practitioners and to address the current crises in leadership, media credibility, media ethics, and the upheavals in the media world. IMAP supports the development of a responsible, trustworthy and independent media industry that is accessible to all. It aims at assisting the news media to shine a light on dialogue, collaboration and conflict resolution.

Mrs. Wetzstein subsequently made a few reflections on the media coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic, using the four core missions of the media as her markers.

First, the media is supposed to gather eye-witness information, she said. However, with Covid-19 human relationships were virtually shut down, which seriously hampered the work of journalists. Covering breaking news stories was a challenge.

Second, the media are supposed to vet or verify information to ensure that the most accurate news possible is spread. During the lockdown contacting experts to get independent information was difficult. Moreover, very few reporters had ever covered a pandemic or had sufficient medical knowledge to vet information. This sometimes led to confusion. For instance, Mrs Wetzstein never believed the jaw-dropping prediction made by the US public officials that between one and two million Americans would die within three months without medication. Actually, she does not know anybody who does. And yet, that prediction was one of the main reasons the US was shut down.

The media is supposed to make sense of complex streams of information and to keep its stories straight and accurate. A hallmark of media is its brilliant investigative reporting. However, even the experts who the media had to depend on, did not understand the Covid-19 virus for a long time.



Mr. Humphrey Hawksley, Author, former BBC correspondent and Asia Bureau Chief, United Kingdom

Humphrey Hawksley is a former BBC foreign correspondent. Joining in 1983, this work has taken him to crises on every continent. He was expelled from Sri Lanka, opened the BBC's television bureau in China, arrested in Serbia and initiated a global campaign against enslaved children in the chocolate industry. He is a documentary maker including 'The Curse of Gold' and 'Bitter Sweet', examining human rights abuse in global trade. He is a prominent commentator and an author of both fiction and non-fiction books. He is an expert on US China tensions in the Asia Pacific region.

Mr. Humphrey Hawksley quoted the Victorian novelist and journalist Charles Dickens: "Always wandering here and there, seeing many little things which, because they interest me, I think may be of interest to others." The role of the media has changed beyond recognition since Dickens' days. On the other hand, the media is still to tell stories and focus on things we may not know but should, or simply are of interest, he said.

Mr. Hawksley said so much confusion exists about Covid-19. Moreover, the news outlets have become increasingly polarized. People want to believe them, but scientists and universities appear to be competing, whilst political leaders are plucking out what best suits their policies.

Mr. Hawksley then explained where news is obtained. Citizen journalism is gaining momentum, with first news injections, such as the George Floyd video, coming from mobiles or tablets.

Much news also comes from amateur blogs, or blogs that have become mainstream. People may follow the blogs they agree with, or whose worldview makes them feel good.

Next there are the daily newsletters issued by, amongst others, think tanks, universities, NGOs.

The United Kingdom has BBC, ITN and Sky as visual broadcast media which are regulated and not allowed to show political bias unlike in the U.S.

Mr. Hawksley went on saying that even before the pandemic, the media became polarized, divided, slanted and political because of Brexit. To make things worse, there is rivalry among television channels. The BBC World Service, Voice of America, RT Russia Today, the China Global Television Network, Al Jazeera, all bring news seen from different angles.

Covid-19 is an apolitical global enemy. One would expect media of different views to share much more common ground to counter this problem. However, through no fault of its own, this has not come true in the UK. Covid-19 has become a battle ground with attacks on the current populist government of Boris Johnson. This is expected, he said, to continue once Brexit is again in the spotlight. Also Sino-US tensions have flared up.



Mr. Willy Fautré, Director, Editor in Chief, Human Rights

Without Frontiers, Belgium

Willy Fautré is the director of *Human Rights Without Frontiers Int'l* and a member of the International Consortium on Law and Religious Studies. He was *chargé de mission* at the Cabinet of the Belgian Ministry of Education and at the Belgian Parliament. He started defending religious freedom of Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox in Communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe during the Cold War, in the mid-1970s. In December 1988, he founded *Human Rights Without Frontiers*. He is a lecturer in the field of human rights and religious freedom. He develops advocacy in international institutions (UN, OSCE, EU). He has published many academic articles.

Human Rights Without Frontiers has been covering for many years violations around the world of Art. 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights regarding freedom of religious belief, as well as any form of discrimination, intolerance or even hostility against specific religious groups.

We were surprised, Mr. Fautré said, to see that, as a result of the pandemic, a number of religious groups were scapegoated by some prominent media and also politicians. Three cases were investigated by Human Rights Without Frontiers: one in South Korea and two in France. What we have found, he said, is that scapegoating never emerges from a vacuum. He compared it to a smoldering fire that can flare up at any moment. This was what happened to the groups that were investigated. They all had fallen victim to hostility and defamation campaigns.

Mr. Fautré then focused on the case of 'La Porte Ouverte Chrétienne' in Mulhouse, which from 17-21 February held its annual international gathering of fasting and prayer. About 2000 Christians from France and neighboring countries attended. The event was held at a time no restrictive measures had been taken by the authorities. President Macron was even at a public meeting in the same town on 18 February, getting a crowd bath and shaking hands. Only a few days later doctors were sent a first official letter by the Ministry saying that Covid-19 was dangerous.

A few days after the church gathering in Mulhouse, about twenty participants got sick and were tested positive. This was the first visible cluster in France, but it was never investigated how and when the virus had reached the religious gathering. Later it was calculated that about 30 people who had attended the gathering had died.

Only in the beginning of March, gatherings of several thousands of people were forbidden. Only four weeks after the gathering of the church, the media stigmatization of the church started, when Ms. Josiane Chevalier, préfet of the Grand Est and Bas Rhin region, declared on the radio that "the pandemic started from an Evangelical gathering which took place in the Haut-Rhin, with more than 3000 people and no respect for the restrictive measures. ..." This baseless accusation, he said, was repeated again and again in her contacts with the media. Subsequently, the stigmatization of the church was taken over and even amplified by the French media.

This was reminiscent of the state-driven warning campaigns and defamation activities of anti-cult associations against so-called cults over the last three decades, which have been denounced by the UN and OSCE scores of times.

There was no public word of compassion for believers who were victimized twice, first by the virus and second by the public stigmatization and scapegoating. Freedom of religion is on very shaky ground in France.



Dr. Rubina Möhring, President, Reporters Without Borders, Austria

Dr. Möhring has been the President of Reporters Without Borders in Austria since 2001., defending Freedom of Information. She is a longtime TV journalist, special correspondent, and representative of the Austrian Broadcasting Corporation, ORF, on the tri-national TV-channel, 3sat. She is the co-founder and moderator of the monthly TV-Talk, Media-Quartett, on Okto-tv, Austria. Dr. Möhring is a historian and longtime university lecturer on journalistic studies at the Universities of Vienna, Innsbruck, and the postgraduate Danube University, Krems. In 2016, she received the Golden Order of Merit of the Republic of Austria.

Mrs. Rubina Möhring as a representative of Reporters Without Borders shed some light on the situation of the media and journalists at the time of the Coronavirus and what may be the consequences for human rights in general. She reminded us of Art. 19 of the Declaration of Human Rights, that guarantees press freedom, freedom of information, opinion etc. Generally speaking, there is no democracy without press freedom and information of information. On the other hand, governments and politicians who minimize press freedom or freedom of information are more or less autocratic and far away from living liberal democracy. Just look at Hungary, Poland and Serbia, she said. Also look at Russia, Turkey, China and, in a certain way, also the U.S. where President Trump declared at the very beginning of his presidency that media and journalists are the main enemies of the American society. Autocratic politicians shun the critical media, she said, and want people to believe rather than the media.

Especially in times of pandemics sometimes even democratic governments try to control the flow of information by media control or a lack of transparency. This results in a lack of credibility in the quality media and a growing interest in fake or alternative news, or conspiracy theories, which is not entirely without danger. We may come to a point, she said, where nobody knows anymore what is true or not.

On the other side, politicians, even in so-called traditional democracies, try to manipulate people, as was very obvious during the first weeks of the corona crisis in Austria, when the government turned the public television channel into a state television channel.

Mrs. Möhring believes that the more we are taken hostage by the coronavirus, the more we have to fight for freedom of information and press. She quoted Mr. Harlem Désir, the OSCE representative of Freedom of Press, who on the occasion of this year's International Day of Freedom said: "Let journalists do their jobs unhindered, ensure them access of information, and support those media that are financially struggling..." Financially speaking, the pandemic has hard hit the media. Corona has made it difficult to make both ends meet as a freelance journalist, fewer journalists can do time-consuming investigative journalism, which affects the quality of information. The media should therefore be supported by the government, without being influenced by them. This is a hot issue as especially in autocratic countries, the politicians try to influence the media.

Mrs. Möhring went on quoting Mr. Désir's speech: "As the world finds itself in the midst of a global pandemic, the necessity of a free media is even more wise and crucial than ever. To combat false information, however, this cannot be achieved by limiting media freedom... Rumours are best checked by ensuring access to pluralistic and independent sources of information, rather than by censorship..."

In conclusion Mrs. Möhring reminded us that since the French Revolution and the time of the Enlightenment, media have been considered as the fourth pillar in society, in democracy. The media should be a mirror for politicians to show both what is right and what is wrong. Critical journalism is not negative but positive. Sometimes politicians cannot accept this.

In the subsequent Q&A and panel discussion, the question was put as to why no one had spoken about the WHO.

Mrs. Möhring thinks quite positively about the WHO and should be listened to.

Mr. Hawksley compared the WHO to a lightning rod. As soon as the WHO is mentioned, society becomes polarized. The WHO is one of these institutions which fifty years ago would have trusted and followed without questions. It is now being ripped apart by the social and other media on each side. Those who are pro-American and anti-China will go for the WHO to diminish its status in the eyes of many people.

Mr. Fautré added that the WHO has now become a battlefield between the US and China for many reasons, but in particular for their image. What has really not been put on the radar, he added, is that President Jinping's wife Pen Liyuan is an Ambassador of Goodwill for the WHO. He thinks this sheds an interesting light on the way China, and President Jinping in particular, are lobbying the WHO.



Mr. Jacques Marion, President, UPF Europe and the Middle East

Mr. Marion is a French citizen, born in Cameroon. He worked for twelve years with Unification Movement programmes in Northern, Central and Southern Africa. Between 1998 and 2006, he worked in China as a Vice President of the International Educational Foundation, based in Beijing. From 2006 to 2013 he served as Secretary General of UPF Eurasia, based in Moscow. He is currently the president of UPF Europe and the Middle East and the president of UPF France.

Mr. Jacques Marion, President of UPF Europe and the Middle East, gave the final remarks.

He said that after the WWII the Cold War was fought more through the media than by military means, which raises the question whether and how the power of the media can be used for peacebuilding.

When UPF founder Dr Moon created the World Media Association in 1978, he said: “My ultimate goal is to achieve lasting peace. This goal is far more likely to be accomplished by the work of the media than by military people.”

Two years before, after leading a large peace rally in Washington D.C. to mark America's bicentenary, Dr Moon announced his intention to hold a peace rally in Moscow. As he was an opponent of communism, many doubted his words, but in April 1990 his prediction did come true. Dr and Mrs Moon were welcomed by Mr Gorbachev at the Kremlin. Although many factors were involved, it was mostly because of the media, and not the least because of the Washington Times newspaper, founded by Dr. Moon in 1982, that this encounter was possible.

In 1990 the UPF founders were invited, along with prominent world leaders, to a World Media Conference in Moscow jointly held by the Soviet news agency Novosty Press and the World Media Association, the precursor of UPF. This conference helped to open doors for many years of work by our organization in the former Soviet Union, work that is still going on today.

In 1989, Dr Moon launched the Segye Times newspaper, whose main purpose was to contribute to peace and the reunification of the Korean Peninsula. Two years later, the UPF founders were invited by Kim Il Sung to North Korea. Their meeting helped to open a new era of cooperation. The Segye Times has ever since been at the forefront of the effort to peacefully reunite the Korean Peninsula, a goal still to be attained.

At the UPF World Summit in February of this year, the Washington Times and Segye Times were the main organizers of the Media Conference that launched IMAP.

Mr. Marion sincerely hopes that, just as the World Media Association helped to bring cooperation and understanding between the USA and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, IMAP can successfully build bridges between today's powerful enemy nations, China and the United States, while remaining a voice for truth and the conscience of society.