

# Savouring media freedom

**WEEKEND REFLECTIONS**



By Pramod de Silva

**M**ore than two decades ago, while attending a training course conducted by a reputed international news organisation, I was told that 'no story is worth your life'. Yet, journalists around the world risk their lives every day to tell the complete story and take the complete picture.

More than 12 journalists have been killed in Ukraine alone after war broke out there. More than 45 journalists lost their lives last year in the course of their duties. On World Press Freedom Day which falls on May 3, we should remember their service to humanity.

However, obstacles to freedom of expression are only a part of the story. Journalists and journalism itself are facing another challenge which is also an opportunity. There are so many types of 'new media' which are competing with traditional media to catch public attention, from Facebook and Twitter to mobile phone apps and websites.

Every year, May 3 is a date which celebrates the fundamental principles of press freedom and examines critical issues affecting the media. The theme this year is "Journalism Under Digital Siege." The goal is to underline the role of the information in an on-line media environment. While the main event will be held in Uruguay, events are planned in more than 100 countries to celebrate the Day, which also marks the 31st anniversary of the Windhoek Declaration for the promotion of free and pluralistic media.

## Conventional newspapers

Adopted in 1991 after a conference held in Windhoek on the development of a free African press, this declaration emphasizes the importance of an independent press for the development and preservation of democracy and economic development. Two years later, the UN General Assembly established the World Press Freedom Day.

Indeed, the focus of the celebration is on the potential of the Internet and digital platforms as well as the more established forms of journalism in contributing to freedom of expression, good governance, and sustainable development.



**WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY FALLS ON MAY 3**

**JOURNALISM UNDER DIGITAL SIEGE**

**ON THE OTHER HAND, MANY RADIO AND TV JOURNALISTS CONTRIBUTE TO THEIR WEBSITES AND APPS. TRADITIONAL TV PROVIDERS SUCH AS CNN AND AL JAZEERA HAVE EXTENSIVE WEBSITES. THUS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRINT AND ELECTRONIC MEDIA HAS BLURRED, WHICH IS A HEALTHY OVERALL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE MEDIA**

The word 'press' used to be just that - conventional newspapers. With the increasing dominance of radio and television, the word 'media' found favour. But now it is changing again.

The arrival of the digital revolu-



tion, the rapid development of the Internet, the emergence of new forms of media (interactive iPad editions of newspapers are an example), and the rise of online social networks have reshaped the media landscape and made 'the press' of 2022 vastly different from that of 1991, when the Windhoek Declaration was signed.

While new media platforms have made it possible for almost any citizen

(also called citizen journalists) to communicate 'live' to a large global audience, not everything out there on the Net is the gospel truth. Separating the wheat from the chaff is a challenge under these circumstances. It is also a frightening prospect that billionaires can buy entire new media platforms - one example is Elon Musk's US\$ 44 billion purchase of Twitter. How the "world's town square" will change un-

der his leadership is anybody's guess.

There are security, safety and privacy issues too. The challenge is to fully optimise the potential of the Internet and digital media while not compromising civil liberties including the right to freedom of expression and privacy.

## Latest trends

But one cannot deny the immense power of the Net and Net-derived phone apps to inform and enlighten the world in a flash. People around the world are challenging authorities and expressing their opinions via the Internet. These new types of media have enriched news and information resources and made inroads into the realm of print press, radio, TV and news agencies.

But reports of the death of the traditional newspaper (at least in its present dead tree form) are greatly exaggerated. Newspapers represent a US\$ 305 billion business globally with around three billion readers a day in hundreds of languages. Note that some of them read the newspapers via apps and the Web.

There is life in print, yet. But in the long-term, print media may find it extremely difficult to survive without going electronic in one form or another - Web, Kindle, iPad etc.

A look at the book industry, where both paperback and hardback book sales have been affected by e-books, confirms these worst fears. Ideally, all newspapers need to complement their print editions with a wide variety of other outlets, with or without paywall systems.

Print journalists too must adapt to these changes without essentially being bound to the print medium. For example, many print journalists already carry powerful smartphones which can shoot short videos which can be uploaded to their interactive, full multimedia Web and iPad editions.

## Humble reporter, the heartbeat of the media

On the other hand, many radio and TV journalists contribute to their websites and apps. Traditional TV providers such as CNN and Al Jazeera have extensive websites. Thus the distinction between print and electronic media has blurred, which is a healthy overall development for the media.

May it be print, Web, new media, radio or TV, the humble reporter is the heartbeat of the media. It is his or her courage (an increasing number of journalists and media workers are women) that helps to keep the reader or viewer (again, the distinction is blurring) informed.

Although other pertinent issues are discussed, the World Press Freedom Day is their day, above all else.

From a war correspondent working for a global media giant to the health reporter of a small regional newspaper, their duty is to tell the story, the truth, as it is, in a responsible manner. To recognise their courage, UNSECO annually presents the UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize, created in 1997.

The prize is named in honour of Guillermo Cano Isaza, a Colombian journalist who was assassinated in front of the offices of his newspaper, El Espectador, in Bogota, on December 17, 1986.

We cannot predict what the media will be like even 10 years hence. Technology moves so fast, but the will and the courage to tell the story and the truth shall remain. Governments and other stakeholders should thus ensure the freedom of the media and protect the public's Right to Information. Print newspapers may follow the Dodo into extinction, but good journalism will never ever die.