

# Brexit and World Press Freedom Day

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Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2019 is World Press Freedom Day. This date is both 20 days before the European Parliament Election and 23 days after the arrest of Wikileaks Founder Julian Assange. Considering debates around the impartiality of the BBC regarding its coverage of Brexit, and the controversy surrounding the treatment of Assange since 2012, we should all take a moment to celebrate and to reaffirm the importance of press freedom.

Since the 2016 European Union Membership Referendum, the BBC has been under ever-increasing scrutiny from both sides of the debate. Claims of selection bias have been levelled by Leave supporters with regard to the BBC's choice of contributors and editorial lines since the referendum. On the other hand, many Remain supporters have claimed that, by equating the views of scholars and industry minds on both sides of the debate, the BBC has neglected its duty as a public service broadcaster; the argument follows that the corporation is creating an artificial balance of "expert" opinion which has damaged the social, political and economic makeup of the UK.

Does the BBC have a duty to balance the views of recognised experts with those of non-experts? How does the BBC decide which experts are credible, and which are not? Does the licence fee put undue pressure on a journalist's need for freedom?

Without a free press, billions of people would be left without the information needed to make responsible decisions about their lives and futures. In the absence of honest and open journalism, many of us would not have access to the health, social and political research which helps to extend lives and improve well being. Lifestyle changes such as those to reduce smoking and alcohol consumption, the 1000 steps challenge and the importance of limiting screen-time have been kick started by the collaboration between academia and the press.

One of the most important functions of press freedom is to allow civilians to understand the impact that their government, as well as governments around the world, are having on the lives of people and

the natural world. From the Sky's Ocean Rescue campaign to eliminate single use plastic, to the national coverage of the Extinction Rebellion protests and the global media effort to keep us aware of the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar, journalists continue to give voices to the most vulnerable.

The link between many of the most established news organisations and a small, select group of big businesses can not be ignored. There is always intense pressure for journalists to balance the needs of informing and educating their readership, with ensuring the financial stability and dominance of the business's interests. The struggle to maintain a free press within the confines of a hyper-capitalist system may present an even more considerable challenge than the threat of state suppression.

Press freedom is not solely the domain of large, multi-national media organisations. Throughout history, local and independent newspapers have been a driving force for change at a community level; these changes can often go unnoticed by the national press but are integral to the lives of often voiceless citizens. Local media campaigns have helped to reduce knife-crime, rescue women and children from sexual exploitation, and to arrest the impact of localised austerity on public goods and services.

In order to fully appreciate the importance of press freedom, you only have to look at the parts of the world that have majorly restricted it. In 2019, Reporters Without Borders compiled the World Press Freedom Index; the report showed that an increase in fear among the press has been fuelled by an escalation in violent attacks on individuals and institutions. Sections of the regions of MENA (Middle East and North Africa) and EECA (Eastern Europe and Central Asia), already the most restrictive in the world, have grown more hostile to the press since 2013. Many of the countries within these regions have suffered with economic hardship and armed conflict; moreover, the people living day-to-day in these places need to rest of the world to understand the challenges facing their societies.

News organisations do not come much more micro in scale than Wikileaks; founded, popularised and damaged predominantly by one man, Julian Assange. A day after Assange was given a 50-day jail term for breaching his bail conditions, it is right to ask: Should the

controversy surrounding Julian Assange's personal life negate the importance of the work done by Wikileaks and its supporters? The American state's attempts to silence Assange and whistle-blowers Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden for leaking evidence of alleged U.S crimes against humanity. Are the actions of Manning, Snowden and Assange different from any other journalist doing their job? Does any organisation such as Wikileaks not provide a unique service for society, in operating outside of the modern, organisational news industry?

The stark polarisation of the debates around both the ethics of hacking and of Brexit has led some to question the importance of press freedom, but I would argue that it has never been more important. More than 90% of the world's data has been generated over the last three years. A free and unobstructed press can get more of that information into the minds of those who need it most. It's time to celebrate the BBC, The Guardian, The Telegraph, Wikileaks and all of those organisations that give the people greater access to the power.

**The Centre for Brexit Studies is currently conducting a study into the changing voter attitudes and perceptions toward Brexit. Have Your Say on Brexit by taking our survey here: <http://bit.do/cbsbrexitsurvey>**