

Dates: 2 - 4 May 2016

Country: Finland, Helsinki



The Media Diversity Institute (MDI) joined over 50 civil society and media organisations to mark the World Press Freedom Day (WPF2016) this year in Helsinki. At the event [organised by UNESCO](#), there were more than 1100 participants who celebrated the fundamental principle of press freedom reminding the world that in dozens of countries media still face censorship, fines and closure while journalists are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered. According to UNESCO, 825 journalists are known to have lost their lives doing their job over the past decades. Only less than 6 percent of these killings have been resolved.



The [UNESCO/Guillermo Cano World Press Freedom Prize](#) was awarded to Khadija Ismayilova, an investigative journalist in Azerbaijan for her ‘outstanding contribution to defence and promotion of press freedom’. Unfortunately, Khadija was not in Helsinki, but in prison. At the trail that many human rights and media organisations consider as politically motivated, Khadija was imprisoned on charges related to abuse of power and tax evasion.

This year's celebration of the WPFDD focused on freedom of information and sustainable development; protecting press freedom from censorship and surveillance and ensuring the safety of journalists both on and offline. The main WPFDD 2016 theme was *“Access to Information and Fundamental Freedoms. This Is Your Right!”*.

Also, the celebration of WPFDD in Helsinki marked the 250th anniversary of the world’s first freedom of expression and freedom of information legislation, promulgated by modern-day Finland and Sweden in 1766.



Gathering prominent experts from different parts of the world, MDI produced a session, together with the [European Broadcasting Union \(EBU\)](#) and Finnish Broadcasting Co. [YLE](#), on the impact of the refugee crisis on public service media (PSM) values. Citing examples from Asia-Pacific to Afghanistan and South America, to Middle East, North Africa and Europe, the MDI panel looked at the controversy surrounding the media coverage that is often sensationalised in countries with predominantly commercial broadcasters.

“Unfortunately, [recent studies by Cardiff University](#) and UNESCO, Finnish Institute and [the Ethical Journalism Network](#) (EJN) show that refugees and migrants are often portrayed as potential criminals who are not interested in having jobs but only in using the European taxpayers’ money, and even as extremists and terrorists, a threat to the European security,” said Milica Pesic, MDI Executive Director and a moderator at the WPF event.

“That is what our editors want us to say,” added [Mircea Barbu](#) , a Romanian Foreign Affairs reporter who recently resigned from the most popular commercial TV channel in Romania, refusing to link refugees with extremism as asked by his superiors.

The panel discussed whether neutrality is possible or even desirable in the news coverage of migration. Ali Jahangiri, a Finnish radio presenter, who recently made a [TV documentary *Unknown Refugee*](#) , was strongly against “forced balance where the media reporting is based on the idea of creating a debate by picking up extreme ends of opinions on controversial themes such as the refugee crisis”.

Charlotte Harder from the Danish Broadcasting Corporation claimed that “being fair instead of being neutral” is more appropriate term when reporting on such themes.



Carolina Matos, a former Brazilian journalist who lectures at London City University, argued that public service broadcasters (PSB) need to reinforce their commitment to providing balanced and fair, accurate and in depth quality reporting. “Various academic studies have shown how it is vital for democracy, producing more election news, longer stories of substance and giving more attention to minority parties than commercial TV. Different studies have stressed how countries with a strong PSB tradition - such as Britain, Denmark and Finland - pointed out that citizens gain more knowledge of politics and international affairs than their counterparts in the US for example. However, in line with PSB values, we also need more in depth reporting on the refugee crisis alongside the human interest focus, with more stories that underline the causes and point out to future solutions as well as the economic benefits provided by migrants in Europe,” said Matos.



Talking about how media in the Middle East and North Africa portray refugees, professor at the University of Westminster, Naomi Sakr, insisted that fairness, accuracy and balance should be crucial principles of any professional media outlet, whether they are commercial or public.

[Ade Armando](#) , professor at University of Indonesia and the editor-in-chief of [an online magazine Madina](#)

that promotes Islamic pluralism and criticised Islamic radicalism, expressed his distress with commercialisation of Indonesian media.

“What profit-obsessed broadcasters in my country are doing is to sensationalise every possible issue,” said Armando talking at the panel on the impact of the refugee crisis on public service values.

“If public service media are to serve the public, they should be following five basic principles - fairness, accuracy, balance, inclusion and sensitivity. It is not rocket science but it does need to

be led from those from on the top of public service media. Journalists, regardless how well trained they are, cannot do very much if they are not supported and encouraged by their bosses,” concluded Milica Pesic at one of the panels at the WPF 2016 in Helsinki.

[Panellists' biographies](#)

[Full Programme](#)