

World Press Freedom Day Statement

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The world observes World Press Freedom Day, today May 3.

This year's theme is, "Critical Minds for Critical Times: Media's role in advancing peaceful and inclusive societies."

There can be no doubt about the value of the work of journalists. They report on human rights violations and work of governments, give voice to the victims and the oppressed, and contribute towards raising awareness of social, environmental and humanitarian issues.

However, globally, the media is at a crossroads. These are not normal times and the current events around the world offer depressing insights about the limits of democracy and press freedom.

While today is an opportunity to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom, it's also an occasion to take a closer look at press freedom around the world and to also pay homage to reporters and journalists who have lost their lives in the line of duty.

All too often, media personnel find themselves in the line of fire and don't get the credit they deserve. According to the United Nations, journalism is one of the most dangerous professions in the world.

While we've been waxing poetic about how the world has become a global village, the reality is that today's mass communications landscape is undergoing an unprecedented amount of fragmentation and polarization. From the face of it, media houses around the world are now becoming more like churches - defined by political and cultural ideology; and promoting beliefs, values and special interests espoused by dubious demographic groups.

Post-truth, post-fact, has been abetted by the evolution of the media. Basically post-truth entails the selective use of facts and lenient dealings with matters of truth - questioning institutions and received wisdom, and not appearing to feel any discomfort about back-pedaling.

While some justify the end of the "factual" era on the rise of unfettered crony capitalism, others base it on the filter bubble of social media - much of it based on a lack of scientific communication. Everybody has an opinion today: wrong or right, it doesn't matter, as long as a social media outlet exists to express it.

Crucially, the quality of public debate will continue to deteriorate as long as the quality of ideas promoted by the media (including social media) remains wanting. The role of the media in supporting democratic development and in stimulating intellectual growth is now increasingly recognized in international policy statements as well as by academic institutions the world over.

The media can and should play a bigger role in providing the electorate with candid and clear-cut formulation of problems, as well as the facts necessary for intelligent choice. Simply reporting the news is not enough – more analyses and back stories are needed. The news media will need to describe all aspects of the story, with a carefully measured tone and as balanced as possible.

Journalists have an important role in our democracy - their job being to scrutinize the government in power and to challenge it. On that basis, there will always be tensions between the government and the press. But governments do recognize that free and independent journalism reinforces democracy, justice and the rule of law.

Today, on World Press Freedom day, the Media are called upon to exercise continuous responsibility as active members of our democracy. I trust that journalists will see themselves as

leaders, and to come to terms with realities of the burden that associate with their role in nation building.
Thank you.