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Standing up for journalism

By Jim Boumelha, President of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

The freedom of the press and the freedom of journalists to do their job are in everyone's best interest. However, journalistic fatalities are set to reach a record high this year and attacks on journalists trying to do their jobs continue with impunity. On Press Freedom Day, Amnesty International backed the IFJ's call for global action to protect journalists. The two organisations saw their work converge as they campaigned for the release of BBC journalist Alan Johnston earlier this year.

However, it's not just physical attacks that are undermining the ability of journalists to do their jobs. "Stand Up for Journalism" was first initiated by the National Union of Journalism (NUJ) in Britain and Ireland as a platform to protest about precarious working conditions and rampant commercialisation that is ripping out the heart of quality journalism. The call quickly struck a chord with organisations beyond journalists' groups all over Europe and has become the first day of action ever organised to raise the alarm over the future of journalism.

Tens of thousands of journalists are planning activities in every European capital to highlight the dramatic media crisis over political pressure, falling standards and poor working conditions. But perhaps the most dramatic development has been the new coalitions being built between media and civic organisations to challenge the collapse of confidence in media.

Journalism worldwide has reached a crisis point. The reaction of media owners faced with ever-declining newspaper sales and shrinking audiences for prime time television news has been to cut back on editorial resources and to reduce spending on training and investigative journalists.

These are difficult times, when the need for aware, independent and ethical journalism is greater than it has ever been. We all know that good, accurate and reliable journalism keeps people informed and helps them decide for themselves. But calls to ethical journalism and higher standards are not easy in an age when media are in ferocious competition for readers and viewers and are trying to cope with a revolutionary change in our industry.

In this turbulent process, it is a fact that too many employers have forgotten about the mission of journalism. Many of them have little or no respect for workers' rights or professional standards. They are, too often, obsessed with financial and commercial objectives.

In the UK, over 6000 media jobs have disappeared in the last two years. More recently, the two main broadcasters have announced sweeping cuts that would have a dramatic impact on quality – BBC management has announced its intention to cut 2000 jobs primarily in news, factual programming and regional centres. At the same time, ITV is planning to halve their local news budget and drastically reduce the number of regional newsrooms.

In the US, the traditional media – broadcasting and print – which have been the lifeblood of modern democracy are undergoing tumultuous changes. Knight Ridder, the nation's most Pulitzer-honoured newspaper chain, was dismantled. Hundreds of reporters and editors had to swallow hard and accept buyout offers at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, *The Boston*

Globe, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, *The Dallas Morning News*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and many other newspapers.

At the same time, many dailies, some with a record of inspirational international coverage, have closed their remaining overseas bureaus. CBS News, which only a few years ago boasted about having 24 foreign bureaus and stringers in 44 countries, has now only six bureaus remaining, none of them in Africa or Latin America. Time Inc. got rid of 650 jobs in early 2006. Among the redundancies were Don Barlett and Jim Steele, two of the nation's best investigative journalists. A week later, it was reported that Time Inc. paid \$4 million for exclusive photographs of Shiloh, the newborn baby of Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt.

The Internet company AOL is current undergoing a massive restructuring of their global business, cutting 20% of their staff around the world.

In almost every country, media are undergoing what is now termed a "historic transformation". But all this is taking place in a time of media concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, absentee owners, harvested investments, hollowed-out newsrooms and thus diminished standards resulting in falling quality and in trust in media.

"Standing Up for Journalism" is just the beginning of a fight back to put quality work and decent journalism back on the media agenda. The sheer breadth of the activities organised by journalists' group on the day is proof that media worldwide is in crisis. Raising awareness about the need for good, accurate and reliable journalism to keep people informed and help them decide for themselves is the first step in a long battle.

In the UK and Ireland, scores of activities will be taking place, in some instances involving civic groups in targeting politicians. In Belgium, Croatia, Finland, Iceland, Scandinavian countries, Slovakia and Spain, the main thrust will be public debates on radio and television, opinion pieces in national newspapers and roundtable discussions involving journalists, media owners and government representatives. In Belgium, the main event will bring together Thomas Hammarberg, Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe; Lorenzo Consoli, the President of the International Press Corps in Brussels and the European Federation of Journalists.

In Cyprus, France, Portugal and Romania, journalists will demonstrate outside their parliaments. German, Greek and Serbian journalists will go further and take a symbolic stoppage and literally stand up for journalism. The Swedish union has elaborated a series of grievances about the deterioration of their work, which will be presented to all the media owners.

Everywhere in Europe, journalists will be standing up, not just to protest against the slash and burn tactics of employers, but to reclaim the ethical values of their profession and to warn politicians that the drop in quality and standards now poses a threat to democracy.

This article was written by an outside contributor and does not necessarily reflect Amnesty International views.

Read more:

[Amnesty International welcomes release of Alan Johnston](#) (News, 4 July 2007)

[Press Freedom Day: Global action needed to protect journalists](#) (Web feature, 3 May 2007)

External links (Amnesty International is not responsible for the content of external sites):

[The International Federation of Journalists](#)

[Stand Up for Journalism website](#)

[picture caption] Journalists attend the launch of Amnesty International's Report 2007