

Why journalists are dying to tell a story

At a time when they face near unprecedented threats, journalists across the globe marked World Press Freedom Day on Friday. Foreign Editor David Pratt takes a sobering look at the human cost of a free press

JUST over a week ago I was shot at, kidnapped, blindfolded, held captive and interrogated. Not for real you understand, though over the years as a reporter I've experienced all this in real time. Instead, in this instance, I was undergoing what is known as hostile environment training (HET).

For fully four days I was taught by ex-special forces soldiers and marines how among other things to treat traumatic wounds, identify improvised explosive devices (IEDs), keep safe from cyber security threats and went through a mock kidnapping and detention that involved being blindfolded and put into stress position in a shipping container by masked armed men somewhere in a forest in rural England.

In the woods outside, the flat pop pop of blank ammunition being fired from actual weapons as colleagues were summarily "executed" was, at times, chillingly real.

I know this because years ago during the war in the former Yugoslavia I was lucky enough to actually survive just such an experience when the bullets were all too real and people died.

Hostile environment training might sound like fun and a bit over the top, but it's far from it.

In many ways it has become a professional necessity for those journalists whose beat includes some

of the more risky locations in the world. In many cases it's now mandatory before such assignments can be embarked on.

Alongside me on the course were colleagues from across the globe, representing news organisations like the BBC, ITN, NBC, CBS and CNN as well as freelancers like myself. Each and every one of us had our litany of stories about the threats and narrow escapes faced in the course of our work over the years.

These stories and those of others took on a renewed resonance on Friday as those of us within the reporting trade marked World Press Freedom Day on May 3.

This year, like every year, the event is gauged by the unavoidable reality that journalists around the world continue to work under attack. Perhaps at no time in recent memory has that been more the case than it is today.

Writing a few days ago to mark the

occasion, Michael Slackman, the international editor of the New York Times, reminded readers of how we are living at a moment in history when democratic values are under threat by authoritarian leaders.

"The internet, which holds such promise as a democratising force, has been co-opted by people peddling divisive, hateful ideologies," he observed.

"Citizens around the world who want to speak out are under siege from their own governments," Slackman added, only just touching on the scale of the threat a free press now faces.

One of the aims of World Press Freedom Day is to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the field.

Another is to assess the state of press freedom throughout the world. The World Press Freedom Index, compiled every year by Reporters Without Borders (RSF), does exactly that by evaluating the state of journalism in 180 countries.

Only 24% of those countries are classified as "good". Norway ranks top of the list in terms of press freedom, with Turkmenistan at the bottom.

According to the 2019 Index: "The hostility towards journalists expressed



by political leaders in many countries has incited increasingly serious and frequent acts of violence that have fuelled an unprecedented level of fear and danger for journalists."

As of April 29, the International News Safety Institute reports that so far this year 11 journalists and media support staff have been killed and one citizen journalist. At the same time, RSF counts 175 journalists, 150 citizen journalists and 17 media assistants as being imprisoned.

Last year, a report on global freedom of expression by the British human rights group Article 19 found that media freedom was at its lowest point for a decade.

This is the case no matter what region we look at, whether it's the killing of nine journalists and two media workers in Mexico in 2018, or the imprisonment of 146 journalists and counting in Turkey.



World Press Freedom Day pays tribute to journalists such as Irish reporter Lyra McKee, war correspondent Marie Colvin and Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi

Journalists in Mexico are in 'a state of constant siege that is worsening' with more than 100 murdered in the country since 2000, amid a wave of violence linked to drug trafficking and political corruption

curtailing and jailing media workers at every turn.

It's understandable, of course, that not everyone empathises with what journalists do.

For years in the job I've personally lost count of the times individuals have rolled their eyes and given me contemptuous looks on hearing that I was "one of those people".

As a journalist, I, like many colleagues, have often been regarded as being about as worthy as something you would scrape off the sole of your shoe.

In some instances such responses, I freely admit, were only a result of our own making by some within the profession.

At its worst the media can be intrusive, lurid and vacuous or so beholden to political or commercial power that it becomes not so much unworthy as downright dangerous. To that end we need to keep our own house in order and accountable.

"We have a responsibility to the audiences we serve and to the wider public to be truthful and accountable, transparent and independent, says Hannah Storm, director of the Ethical Journalism Network.

As journalists we need to root our work in humanity and the basic principles of ethical journalism, observes Storm, as we educate others and ourselves about the role of journalists and what is at stake when press freedom suffers.

Personally, I've always felt that the media at its negative worst has to be seen in context and offset against the wider undeniable good that a free press brings. Part of this wider good is the search for justice, says Christian Christensen, professor of journalism at Stockholm University in Sweden.

"Some of the very best journalism

 AGENDA

Journalists in the line of fire here and abroad

NAOMI MCAULIFFE

Amnesty International's
Scotland Programme Director

PRESS freedom is the cornerstone of a rights respecting society and we must guard it closely. On World Press Freedom Day we remember journalists around the world who are imprisoned, exiled or have been killed for simply doing their job – reporting the news. The recent death of Northern Ireland journalist Lyra McKee hit much closer to home.

Lyra was due to speak at an event this evening – a screening of *A Private War*, the film biopic of slain journalist Marie Colvin – who was killed in the line of duty in Homs, Syria on February 22, 2012. Marie was the only journalist writing for a British publication embedded in the besieged city at the time and, in one of her last reports before she died, she criticised Bashar al-Assad's armed forces, saying: "It's a complete and utter lie they're only going after terrorists. The Syrian Army is simply shelling a city of cold, starving civilians."

Amnesty's Northern Ireland Programme Director Patrick Corrigan knew Lyra McKee: "We are all feeling the pain at the death of Lyra McKee. She was a rising star of journalism in Northern Ireland, dogged in her pursuit of the truth, whether about Troubles-era deaths or the rising trend of youth suicide, and she shared her own story of growing up gay so that others could benefit.

"That she was cut down in the street by a gunman's bullet has shocked us to our core. Lyra's death at the hands of republican paramilitaries is a reminder of the risks that reporters face every day around the world, including here in Northern Ireland."

The UK is now ranked 33rd in the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, which may be surprise to some. Although the UK has made minor improvements in terms of press freedom, Amnesty International still has serious concerns about members of the media being targeted for their work uncovering human rights abuses.

Journalists Trevor Birney and Barry McCaffrey are facing the prospect of serious charges for their vital work in uncovering police collusion in Northern Ireland. They were arrested on August 31, 2018 in connection with an alleged breach of the Official Secrets Act, relating to confidential documents about the police investigation of the murder of six men in a bar in the village of Loughinisland, County Down, in 1994. Up to 100 police officers from the Police Service of Northern Ireland and Durham Constabulary raided the journalists' homes and offices, seizing documents and computers, which the men are fighting to have returned. Amnesty International UK is campaigning on their behalf as they remain on bail pending further questioning.

Globally, journalists and media outlets are under increasing attack for their essential work. Concerted

international effort is needed to ensure the safety of media workers, and we need to see those who harass or attack them brought to justice.

Turkey continues to use repressive tactics in attempt to end all independent journalism. Turkey is the world's biggest jailer of journalists with some sentenced to life imprisonment simply for doing their jobs. Last week, Myanmar's Supreme Court upheld the conviction and seven-year prison sentence of Reuters journalists Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo. Their cases are not isolated ones as press freedom continues to be curtailed. The rejection of their appeal compounds a grave injustice and illustrates how the authorities will quash independent reporting on the military's atrocities in Rakhine State – even at the cost of debasing the country's judicial system.

Lyra McKee's death is a reminder of the risks that reporters face every day around the world, including close to home and underlines how important it is we protect our journalists and the cherished press freedoms both in this country and around the world.

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