

Understanding the link between a media and information literate citizenry and the (un)-safety of journalism

Silvia Chocarro (silvia@article19.org)¹
Jackie Harrison (j.harrison@sheffield.ac.uk),²
Albana Shala (shala@freepressunlimited.org),³
Sara Torsner (s.k.torsner@sheffield.ac.uk)⁴

Paper presented at the Academic Conference on the Safety of Journalists,
World Press Freedom Conference 2020, December 9 - 10 December 2020.

*This is work in progress:
Please do not quote from it without the authors' permission.*

Abstract

¹ Dr. Silvia Chocarro is Head of Protection at Article 19 and a member of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at the University of Sheffield

² Jackie Harrison is Professor of Public Communication and UNESCO Chair on Media Freedom, Journalism Safety and the Issue of Impunity and the Chair of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at the University of Sheffield

³ Albana Shala is Programme Coordinator at Free Press Unlimited and a member of the Centre for Freedom of the Media at the University of Sheffield

⁴ Dr. Sara Torsner is a Research Associate to the UNESCO Chair on Media Freedom, Journalism Safety and the Issue of Impunity, professor Jackie Harrison which is hosted by the Centre for Freedom of the Media at the University of Sheffield

The very basis for journalism to perform its societal role of enabling a well-informed citizenry through the factual reporting of news, grounded in professional standards of accuracy, sincerity and objectivity is that it is undertaken safely. Indeed, the ability of journalism to pursue what we here name a “civil role” (Harrison, 2019), which fosters solidarising inclusion among members of society in support of a shared communicative civil life, is conditioned by its inextricable relationship with a well-informed citizenry.

Key to this relationship is a media and information literate public that is able, not only to critically evaluate media, but also has the capability to understand the societal value of journalism.

This paper therefore argues that strategies to secure journalistic safety must consider how this relationship between journalism and a media and information literate citizenry is prone to attack by divisive anti-civil forces (e.g. from illegitimate state and market intrusion) that produce conditions of civil diminishment and un-safety for journalists (Harrison, 2019 and Torsner, 2019).

This paper first develops a theoretical understanding of the link between a media and information literate citizenry and the (un)-safety of journalism. It establishes how journalistic safety is both positively linked to a media and information literate public that functions as a potential bulwark against attacks targeting journalism – forms of civil resistance, and negatively interlinked with a media and information illiterate citizenry that engenders hostility towards journalism. We conclude that strengthening the media and information literacy of society should be considered as a strategy to safeguard a free, independent and safe environment for journalism.

Second, the paper uses empirical case studies to illustrate the role of citizens and communities of audiences in protecting journalism through expressions of solidarity that articulate an understanding of the societal value of journalism. Doing so the paper examines how a strong relationship of trust between journalism and communities of audiences, and between journalism and members of society, via media and information literacy, can serve to protect journalism in contexts where independent journalism is restricted and regularly attacked.

Part 1. Developing a theoretical understanding of the link between a media and information literate citizenry and the (un)-safety of journalism

Introduction

It is widely recognised that media and information literacy (MIL) is a key competence or 'enquiry based skill' that cultivates people's ability "to access, evaluate, create and share information and media messages" (UNESCO, 2013a: 30). As such, MIL can be described as "a basis for enhancing access to information and knowledge, freedom of expression, and quality education" as "it covers the competencies that are vital for people to be effectively engaged in all aspects of development" (UNESCO, 2013b: 7). In this way, MIL is approached as an umbrella "construct that helps empower people, communities and nations to participate in and contribute to global knowledge societies" (ibid., 17).

A range of terminology, such as digital media literacy, information literacy, visual literacy, Internet literacy or news literacy is used to capture dimensions of MIL. These different conceptions capture the fact that understandings of MIL have continued, and will necessarily continue, "to morph and change as a result of rapid changes in digital media, mass media, social media, popular culture, and society" (Hobbes, 2015:1). The concept 'media and information literacy' (MIL) can be understood as an inclusive and composite conception that illustrates the interlinked and overlapping nature⁵ of media literacy on the one hand and information literacy on the other.⁶ In this way, MIL captures the interrelationship between information and communication and its central role in facilitating citizens' abilities to make informed decisions that are key to citizens "empowerment and participation in the emerging knowledge society, democracy and good governance" (UNESCO, 2013b: 47).

Understood this way a central rationale for promoting MIL is that it is seen to facilitate personal, social, cultural and political empowerment and that it is a means to address the potential harms and risks associated with living "in a media- and technology-saturated cultural environment" (Hobbes, 2015:1). Such debates about the negative effects of increasing digitisation and the rise of the information society and the role of MIL have often been framed around issues concerning the influence of media narratives on children, the relationship between media and violence, media and culture, and negative media effects in general.⁷ This

⁵ See e.g. discussion on information literacy in CILIP Definition of Information Literacy 2018. Available at: <https://infolit.org.uk/ILdefinitionCILIP2018.pdf>

⁶ For a range of definitional approaches to ML, IL and MIL see: Media and Information Literacy. Policy and Strategy Guidelines. Annex 1 (<https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000225606>). For a discussion on the concepts of ML and IL see: Alice Lee & Clement So (2013) Media Literacy and Information Literacy: Similarities and Differences. Livingston, S. (2004) gives a detailed description of the debates about media literacy in the light of new technologies. Livingston, S. et al. (2008) provide an analysis of converging research traditions on what they call 'media and information literacies'.

⁷ See for instance UNESCO (2013a) pp. 78 and Hobbes (2015).

is for instance reflected in research from the field of media studies where the notion of MIL has predominantly been approached as a tool for citizens to critically evaluate media messages and content (emphasising the importance of exposing media biases) as well as the role and power of the media in societies (the media as tools for propaganda).

This rationale for understanding MIL as a tool that empowers citizens by making them resilient to being deceived or misled has become increasingly important. For example in the case of the COVID-19 epidemic we have witnessed what has been called a 'disinfodemic' of falsehoods, fabrications and misinformation. Indeed, the COVID-19 'disinfodemic' is showing how the distortion of fact and obstruction of access to trustworthy sources and reliable information can in fact have life-threatening consequences leading to "confusion about life-saving personal and policy choices, impacting nearly every person on the planet and the global economy" (UNESCO, 2020a). Importantly, it needs to be recognised that within this context of pollution and distortion of the public information environment, forces are directly targeting journalism by disputing its role as an accurate and reliable source of information. Such disputatious rhetoric⁸ presents journalism as the culprit of disinformation and ultimately as being hostile to society itself. It negates the claim that journalism, by definition, is "a power against disinformation" (UNESCO, 2020b) through its commitment to the truth and an absolute obligation not to deceive as upheld through the professional discipline and integrity of journalists who can ensure that facts and opinions are not misrepresented. In short, such claims reject any understanding of journalism as performing an essential public service (Harrison, 2019b) and give licence to attacks on "journalists' reputations and safety", 'perpetuat[ing] the degradation of journalism to the detriment of civic discourse' (Ireton & Posetti, 2018).

These circumstances raise questions with regard to the degree to which the public is either receptive or resilient to attempts to systematically discredit journalism. In this context, MIL is conventionally rolled out as a form of antidote that can be used as a form of 'quality check' to distinguish fact-based and verifiable journalistic information from inaccurate and misleading accounts. We argue however that, there rather exists an underlying and even more fundamental function of MIL which needs to be taken into account, namely that of MIL as facilitating an understanding among citizens of the societal value and need for journalism. From which it also follows that a media and information literate public that understands the societal relevance of journalism is more likely to value it and therefore more likely to understand the consequences of attacks on journalists and journalism as jeopardizing our common right to seek and receive accurate and reliable information as the foundation for

⁸ References and examples of such sentiment through attempts by political actors to publicly discredit journalists by accusing them of peddling 'fake news'

collective democratic life. In short, a media and information literate citizenry would be more resilient to attempts to discredit journalism than a media and information illiterate citizenry.

To demonstrate this, the following steps are taken in the argument that follows. Section 1 outlines an understanding of the societal relevance and civil value of journalism by using Civil Sphere Theory (Alexander, 2006) and Harrison's (2019a) understanding of the 'civil power' of news journalism as guided by a set of normative civil ideals. It then explores the nature of the relationship between journalism and a media and information literate citizenry. Following on from that it shows that attacks on this relationship should be understood as reducing the capacity of citizens to trust journalism and their willingness to defend journalism against attack. These aspects come together to show how attacks on journalism should be understood as a form of civil diminishment of associative and communicative civil life that restricts the self-governing capacity of citizens (Section 2).

1. Understanding the societal value of journalism: MIL and the civil role of journalism

The civil role of journalism should be understood in terms of contributing to the conditions and quality of civil life as a realm of consciousness, understandings and feelings guided by the normative moral concern of solidarity as a means to achieve democratic self-determination and justice (Alexander, 2006). Supporting the solidarising ambitions of civil society, civilly inspired journalism represents a fundamental source of interpretation and symbolic communication which "draws persons together in fellowship and commonality (...) directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs" (Carey, 1992: 5).

As Harrison (2019a) has shown, journalism as oriented by civil ideals reflects a "commitment to traditional journalistic practices of objectivity, truth telling and accuracy", is subject to editorial integrity and "recognises the diversity of incommensurate (though not necessarily incompatible) views and values that exist in civil society, whilst also recognising its duty to be homologous with the world. The civil ideal of the news has a normative force that influences, shapes or reinforces preferences, choices, values, opinions and above all civil norms" (ibid., 51). Accordingly, the civil role of journalism enables "our capacity to relate to each other as citizens" as part of a collective (Silverstone, 2004: 441).

In this way, the civil role of journalism is shaped by an ideal that journalism can enable a well-informed citizenry that understands the societal function/civil value of journalism as supporting the solidarising and inclusive ambitions of democratic associative and communicative civil life. The application of the civil ideal is conditioned by the ability and opportunity for journalism to pursue its civil role as essentially truth-telling. It must however

also be understood that enabling a well-informed citizenry presumes that one either exists or that one can be developed based on the existence of a public interest in knowing 'what is going on'. In other words there exists an inextricable relationship between the civil role of journalism and a well-informed citizenry.

Ultimately, civil journalism is an expression, facilitator and indication of MIL. That is civil journalism both fosters and represents MIL as an activity and presumes a MIL audience, while also keeping the audience well informed. In fact, MIL could be described as a form of civil responsibility i.e. that being a well-informed citizen is a form a civil duty or responsibility in so far as a competent citizen must be able to distinguish trusted sources from unreliable ones. Therefore MIL can be described as the capacity to bestow trust or to provide a public warrant that a journalistic source can be the basis for opinion formation and political and social action.

The relationship between MIL and the civil role of journalism thus centres on the matter of the bestowing of trust, but the bestowing of trust also presumes that there exist people who can do this responsibly. The relationship therefore shows how citizens who wish to be well-informed rely on well-informed sources, whereas well-informed sources write for and behalf of citizens who wish to be well informed. What this essentially shows is the relationship between the well-informed citizen (WIC) who is media and information literate and demands/needs trusted sources of journalism (TSJ) and the fact that TSJ on the other hand need/demand WICs. The relationship between WIC and TSJ is thus mutually dependent, as both must assume the other in order to fulfil their respective roles.

In other words there is a circular relationship between a well-informed citizenry who is sufficiently media and information literate to bestow trust in journalistic sources. This can be represented accordingly.

Well-Informed Citizenry <----- demand/need -----> Trusted Sources of Journalism
Trusted Sources of Journalism <----- demand/need -----> Well-Informed Citizenry

In this way MIL is central to the relationship between civilly inspired journalism and a well-informed citizenry. Civil journalism is thus an expression, facilitator and indication of MIL. That is civil journalism both represents MIL as an activity and presumes a MIL audience, as well as keeping the audience well informed. In short, we have an MIL circle between the well-informed citizen and civilly inspired journalism.

This section has shown how MIL needs to be conceptually linked to an understanding of the ideal civil space via an understanding of the societal value – or civil role - of journalism as connected to its ability to safely inform the public and thus contribute to the quality of collective civil life. The next section of the paper will now turn to how the relationship between the civil role of journalism and a well-informed citizenry is prone to attack by anti-civil forces

(e.g. from illegitimate state and market aggression). These forces target a media and information literate citizenry or civilly inspired journalism as a means to produce the conditions of civil diminishment.

2. Media and information illiteracy as a form civil diminishment

This understanding of the societal relevance of journalism also makes it possible to capture the significance of restrictions and constraints placed upon the civil role of journalism. In fact, it allows us to understand what it is that society risks losing when journalism is attacked. Risk to the civil role of journalism needs to be understood as a complex and multi-dimensional problem and as causing the civil diminishment of journalism as well as the diminishment of a pluralistic and just collective civil life more broadly (Torsner, 2019).

Civil diminishment relies upon and also seeks to engender media and information illiteracy. The processes of the civil diminishment of a media and information literate citizenry range from instances of censorship, restrictions on publications and attacks on the safety of journalists. Attacks on MIL also include all aspects of manufacturing disinformation. The most significant anti-civil forces that require degrees of media and information illiteracy are to be found in state power that reduces a public to partisans and market power that reduces the public to consumers. That is powers that do not treat the public as discerning and demanding citizens that are concerned with inclusive and solidarising democratic civil life.

In essence then, MIL is a threat to anti-civil forces since it provides the basis for critique and criticism of such anti-civil powers via trusted sources of journalism (TSJ). TSJ on the other hand needs well-informed citizens to make its critique and criticism effective and meaningful. In short, to contribute to the quality of civil life.

It is likely that a media and information illiterate public that does not understand or value the functions of the media in democratic societies as well the conditions of freedom and independence that are needed for the media to be able to perform such roles (its civil role) is perhaps less likely to regard issues of safety and protection of journalism as important social problems. Likewise, the safeguarding of journalism is also unlikely to be felt as imperative by the general public in contexts where journalistic outputs may be available only to certain segments of the public such as well-educated and literate people living in urban and city areas.

A media and information illiterate public may also be more easily manipulated by interests that seek to silence journalists and restrict journalism. This can for instance be understood in relation to what is referred to as the 'information disorder' which can be characterised by situations where disinformation and misinformation spread. As pointed out by Ireton and Posetti (2018: 70), news literacy, as in the "ability to understand the language and conventions

of news as a genre, and to recognise how these features can be exploited with malicious intent” is one way of increasing the resilience of the public to disinformation.

3. Conclusion: a theoretical understanding of the link between a media and information literate citizenry and the (un)-safety of journalism

The relationship between journalism and the public is at the very heart of any understanding of the link between MIL and journalism safety. This relationship ultimately centres on the issue of the extent to which the public trusts journalism to hold a deserved warrant for the provision of truthful and accurate information. The fact that the very capacity of the public to bestow trust in journalism is under attack not only threatens to weaken or destroy public trust in journalism, but is in itself a direct threat to the safe undertaking of journalism as it minimizes the likelihood of the public standing up for and defending journalism against forces that seek to diminish it. This is where we argue that MIL, generates civil value – namely as part of the ‘educational programme of democracy’ that fosters in the public capacities for social critique, discernment with regard to the quality of associative life, an interest in democratic governance and above all that understand that attacks on journalism must be resisted. MIL generates recognition and support for the idea that free and independent journalism (even if a public disagrees with the content) must be publicly supported and where necessary defended through the power of public approval and disapproval. It requires, in short a public that recognises, through MIL, its own power of sanction.

Part 2. Empirical case studies: illustrating how relationships of trust with communities of audiences can serve as a means to protect journalism and journalists

Introduction

Having described above a theoretical understanding of the link between a media and information literate citizenry and the (un)-safety of journalism we now introduce five case studies to show how relationships of trust between journalism, citizens and communities of audiences, via media and information literacy (MIL), can serve to protect journalism in contexts where independent journalism is restricted and attacked. As will be shown, this relationship of trust as enabled by media and information literacy is understood to depend upon journalism being valued by its audience for instance in terms of providing trustworthy information, or by supplying information that clearly responds to the concerns and interests of a community. In this way, we will show that even in challenging media environments ‘pockets of resistance’ where professional independent journalism is exercised and supported by an audience, can provide a potential counter force to attacks on the media. This notion of ‘resistance’ is developed around understanding that within free and independent journalism there resides a civil potential to form a counterforce to vested interests that seek to restrict it. This civil potential requires that there exists a relationship of trust between journalism

desirous of resisting vested interests and a discerning media and information literate audience. Building on the theoretical groundwork conducted in Part 1 of the paper this section develops an argument around the necessity to turn our attention not only to the attacks on journalists and journalism themselves, but to look at the role of communities of audiences in protecting journalism through expressions of solidarity that articulate an understanding of the societal value of journalism (via MIL). Doing so, Part 2 of this paper disuses the need for an integrated approach to media and information literacy and safety to enable society more widely – beyond delimited ‘pockets of resistance’ - to become more informed about the civil role and importance of journalism in society, and it suggests that media and information literacy can be used as a tool to formulate counter narratives to those rejecting the value of journalism and the peddling of public mistrust in journalism. To achieve this Part 2 of the paper discusses first the notion of pockets of resistance and then illustrates how these are manifest in five case studies.

1. ‘Pockets of resistance’ for the protection of journalism and journalists

Considering the circumstances surrounding what has been described as the prevailing “information disorder” (Council of Europe, 2017) where citizens encounter an overabundance of both reliable and unreliable information, knowing what information to trust has become increasingly difficult. Recent research shows that, “in place of being uninformed” citizens are at risk of becoming “actively disinformed, or indirectly misinformed” about matters influencing their lives (UNESCO, 2020:20). In this way, it has been shown that disinformation is often designed and implemented so as to mislead populations as well as to “interfere with the public’s right to know and the right of individuals to seek and receive, as well as to impart, information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers”, protected under international human rights to freedom of expression and to hold opinions (UN, 2017). Combined with a general mistrust in information (Wasserman, 2018, 2020) this has been shown to generate “information fatigue” and a reliance on “spurious sources that appeal to [existing] biases and reinforce [...] beliefs or identities” (UNESCO, 2020:20). These developments pose fundamental challenges to citizens’ capacity to engage in collaborative civil life with consequences such as a lack of a common meaning and understanding of basic facts and a shared reality.

To add to this complexity, news journalism, as a provider of evidence-based facts, is described both as a counterforce to the “disinformation order”, as well as an enabler of and conduit for misleading and false information when captured by vested or partisan interests (Harrison, 2019; UNESCO, 2020). Added to this is a declining trust in journalistic information both in contexts of media unfreedom (Wasserman and Madrid-Morales, 2018), but also in contexts with a largely free and independent media (Reuters Institute, 2020; Pew Research Centre, 2020). In this context it can be noted however that what we are currently experiencing in terms of the so called COVID-19 ‘disinfodemic’,⁹ is that an increase in public trust in journalistic news has been indicated (Posetti, Bell and Brown, 2020; Newman, et al., 2020).

⁹ <https://en.unesco.org/news/new-unesco-policy-briefs-launched-assessing-covid-19-disinfodemic-0>

Journalism itself is also a target of disinformation campaigns and attempts to publicly discredit journalists by accusing them for instance of peddling 'fake news' (Reporters Without Borders, 2018). Such narratives serve to delegitimize news journalism by refuting its societal value and by casting it as hostile to society. Under these circumstances the basic underlying premise is that journalism is in danger of losing the public(s) warrant of trust and not being seen by the public as necessary to enable social inquiry in the public interest. As a consequence, society could be more disposed to remaining silent when journalism and journalists are attacked, resulting in a reduction of society's ability to receive fundamental information.

This paper will now show how these negative circumstances require redress and can be mitigated through the fostering of a media and information literate citizenry who can proactively demand trustworthy and enabling journalism. More specifically the paper will use five case studies to illustrate how even in restricted media environments so called 'pockets of resistance' to the civil diminishment of collective democratic life in general and more specifically the diminishment of journalism's ability to support solidarising inclusion as a basic egalitarian democratic principle, can and do emerge and form a counter force to civil diminishment.

These 'pockets of resistance' can be understood accordingly: they are profoundly democratic in terms of demanding reliable news upon which opinions can be based, which builds relationships of trust between the journalists and the audience. And they also reveal the political and civil value of media and information literacy which is to enable critical and challenging positions to be adopted against media capture that generates ideological narrowness, deference to power, acceptance of censorship and acquiescence when facing restrictions on freedom of expression. Media and information literacy understood in this way is an antidote to the suppression of democratic pluralism and the diversity of views and values. Ultimately media and information literacy values independent and professional journalism and supports it to the point where pockets of resistance can be formed and express support as a potential counter force to attacks on the media.

The notion of pockets of resistance is developed here to show that within journalism and its commitment to the ideal of solidarising inclusion resides a capacity to "fight back" against interests that seek to restrict free and independent journalism and to form a community of supportive audiences that protect journalism and those who exercise it. This capacity of civil resistance should be understood as an instantiation of the normative ideal of solidarising inclusion through the real civil role of news journalism. News journalism attached to such a civil ethos commits itself not only to facilitating the building of a shared communicative civil life where common meanings and understandings can be stimulated but also to challenging forces of diminishment by undertaking civil resistance to 'civilise' expressions of anti-civil contestation. This is achieved by facilitating civil input to reform anti-civil conditions that

violate solidarising civil ideals. What this communicative capacity of journalism via a commitment to truthfulness, methodological rigour and transparency signals is that news journalism can hold a well-deserved warrant as a trusted and accountable source of information in service of the public. Five examples below illustrate this point and the value of media and information literacy as the basis for the formation of ‘pockets of resistance’ in contexts of media unfreedom and repression.

1.1. Maria Ressa: How communities of action become communities of care

The UNESCO report ‘An attack on one is an attack on all’ looks at successful initiatives to protect journalists and combat impunity, and the case of American-Filipino journalist Maria Ressa and the online news website Rappler is highlighted as an example showing how journalism and journalistic audiences can be mobilised to counter “the corrosive impacts of organised political ‘trolling’”. By activating “her own online communities in response” Ressa was able to confront some of the online harassment campaigns targeting her and her news platform (Posetti, 2018).

The case of Ressa and Rappler is an example showing how journalistic audiences can be mobilised to fight back against attempts to silence journalism (Posetti, 2018, p. 38). Ressa was the subject of gender-based online harassment (ibid) even before she became the target of legal harassment in 2018. As a consequence, Rappler’s incorporation papers were revoked by the government, its reporters were barred from entering the presidential palace and covering the activities of the president, who has accused *Rappler* of publishing fake news several times (ibid). Ressa was first arrested on February 13, 2019, for cyber libel regarding an article published in 2012, and in June 2020 she was found guilty of this charge, a sentence she will appeal. In the face of this challenging context, the level of solidarity with Ressa has been significant. International support has been prominent to the point that Ressa was named Time’s Person of the Year 2018. Furthermore, the internationally recognized lawyer Amal Clooney is leading Ressa’s legal defence. Nationally, prominent leaders of the opposition, academia and media personalities have expressed support for Ressa. Importantly for this paper Ressa has also received pronounced support and solidarity from her audience. This can be linked to Rappler’s business model which is built on what Ressa has called ‘communities of action’ which entail the conscious development of “niche audiences, and safer spaces for community interaction and participation that respect gender and racial equality, and are inclusive of marginalized communities” (Posetti, 2019). Research has shown that such communities of action can become “guardians of the outlet and its mission: providing challenging and independent journalism in countries where media freedom is under threat, and democratic norms are eroding” (ibid). Highlighting the importance of building communities of action as a mobilizing force against non-democratic and repressive forces Ressa nevertheless points to the fact that she “hope(s) it’s enough to protect our democracy” (ibid).

1.2 Ján Kuciak: Protests against the killing of a journalist end with the resignation of a prime minister

On February 21, 2018, the Slovak investigative journalist Ján Kuciak and his fiancée Martina Kušnírová were killed in their home. Kuciak was reporting for the news website Aktuality on tax fraud associated with individuals close to the ruling social democratic party Smer and on the links between organized crime and public figures. The murder sparked outrage in Slovakia and triggered mass protests with tens of thousands of people demonstrating against institutionalized corruption in the country. “Everyone can make their own judgement about what kind of democracy we live in and who should actually apologise,” were the words of Jan Kuciak’s father at the demonstrations¹⁰ which culminated in the resignation of the Prime Minister, Robert Fico three weeks after the murder. The protests were endorsed by several universities, teachers, school associations, artists and non-governmental organisations in the country,¹¹ but also by tens of thousands of regular citizens. As explained by some of the groups created through the mobilization of this support: “this murder sends a warning signal that those who speak out against the inequities and the waste of public money are likely to be silenced. But this is a country of people not thieves and we will show the killers that we outnumber them and we are not blind.”¹²

1.3 Ivan Golunov: Five days of solidarity to free a journalist

On June 6, 2019, Ivan Golunov, a well-known investigative journalist writing for the online news website Meduza known for his investigative reporting on political corruption in Moscow, was arrested by Moscow law enforcement under charges of the illegal production and sale of drugs, after the police searched him and allegedly found drugs in his bag and apartment.¹³ Golunov denied all the accusations and argued that the drugs were planted.¹⁴ His supporters mounted a nationwide campaign on his behalf. One of the earliest and longest shows of public

¹⁰ The Slovak Spektator (2019). *Massive gatherings remember Kuciak and Kušnírová: We did not forget!* Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22058930/protest-one-year-anniversary-murder-Kuciak-Kusnirova.html>

<https://spectator.sme.sk/c/22058930/protest-one-year-anniversary-murder-Kuciak-Kusnirova.html>

¹¹ The Slovak Spektator (2018). *Massive gatherings remember Kuciak and Kušnírová: We did not forget!* Available at: <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20777059/enough-of-fico-thousands-of-people-shouted-at-gatherings-across-slovakia.html>

¹² Civic Space Watch (2018). *Slovakia: Civil society to react to murder of Ján Kuciak*. Available at: <https://civicspacewatch.eu/slovakia-civil-society-to-react-to-the-murder-of-jan-kuciak/>

¹³ ARTICLE 19 (2019) *Russia: Investigative journalist Ivan Golunov detained and allegedly beaten in custody*. Available at:

<https://www.article19.org/resources/russia-investigative-journalist-ivan-golunov-detained-and-allegedly-beaten-in-custody/>

¹⁴ Meduza (2019) *Pickets begin across Russia in support of arrested Meduza journalists Ivan Golunov*. Available at: <https://meduza.io/en/news/2019/06/07/pickets-begin-across-russia-in-support-of-arrested-meduza-journalist-ivan-golunov>

support was an improvised 'selfie studio' in front of the headquarters of the Moscow city police.¹⁵ For several days (between June 7 and 11) people waited for hours to have their picture taken on that spot as a sign of solidarity with Golunov.¹⁶ Because any public demonstration involving more than one person must receive advance government approval to have legal status in Russia, activists invented the one-person picket, in which a person stands holding a sign for fifteen minutes or so, then someone else takes her or his place. Posters read: "Freedom for Ivan Golunov," "I am Ivan Golunov," and "The Case Against Golunov Is a Case Against Me." The picket line kept getting longer. Such expressions of solidarity were also echoed by media outlets and three leading newspapers, Vedomosti, RBC and Kommersant, agreed to publish the same front page with the exact same layout and the headline "I am/We are Ivan Golunov" calling for a transparent investigation of his case. Four days later Golunov was released, the charges were dropped, and six months later five ex-police officers were charged with fabricating the case.

1.4 Carmen Aristegui: An engaged audience to defend a radio programme

Carmen Aristegui is one of Mexico's leading journalists best known for her investigations of the Mexican government. She is the anchor of the news program Aristegui on CNN en Español and the director of Aristegui Noticias. In March 2015, she was fired from MVS Radio 102.5 FM in Mexico City, where she ran a radio programme since 2009. MVS management justified the dismissal by referring to the decision of Aristegui's team to participate in the Mexicoleaks initiative, a WikiLeaks-inspired whistleblower website that had just been launched. Some weeks before her dismissal Aristegui had published a report on the conflict of interests by then Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto, with a state contractor who was supposed to build a millionaire residence for the President and his family. #EnDefensadeAristegui (In Defence of Aristegui) became a trending topic on social media in Mexico. Thousands of people took to the streets and social media were flooded with demands for Aristegui's return to the airwaves. Civil society organisations, academics, politicians and ordinary citizens showed their disagreement with what they considered as an attack on the right to freedom of expression.¹⁷ Aristegui Noticias issued a statement denouncing the closing of the radio programme as an act to diminish the power of citizens that rely on the information provided by Aristegui Noticias as a means to formulate their political views.¹⁸

¹⁵ Global Voices (2019) The Ivan Golunov phenomenon: a brief moment of solidarity and euphoria in Putin's Russia. Available at: <https://globalvoices.org/2019/06/13/the-ivan-golunov-phenomenon-a-brief-moment-of-solidarity-and-euphoria-in-putins-russia/>

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Olivares, Emir et al (2015) *Indignación por el cese de Aristegui*. La Jornada. Available at: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/2015/03/17/politica/004n1pol>

¹⁸ Aristegui Noticias (2015) *Esta batalla, no lo dude, es por nuestra libertad*. Available at: <https://aristeguinoticias.com/especiales/2015/especiales/05may/recuento-mvs/>

1.5 Huseynov brothers: Igniting protests in Azerbaijan

Emin and Mehman Huseynov are two Azerbaijani bloggers focusing on exposing political corruption. They both chaired the Institute for Reporters' Freedom and Safety (IRFS). After Emin was forced into hiding to avoid arrest in Azerbaijan, he fled and attained political asylum status in Switzerland. His younger brother Mehman continued to work inside the country documenting and raising awareness about violations of press freedom and creating his own social media news channel, which have over a million followers. Mehman was convicted in March 2017 on trumped up charges of slandering an entire police station and was sentenced to two years in jail for defamation. The events that led to his jailing began in early 2017 when he was grabbed and forced into a car by unidentified men in Central Baku. The vehicle drove away and Huseynov's whereabouts remained unknown until the following day. While he was held incommunicado, the blogger's family and colleagues – concerned for his welfare – repeatedly contacted the police for help, but to no avail.¹⁹ Mehman Huseynov went to jail. After two years in prison, in January 2019, Huseynov went on a hunger strike after being threatened with having his sentence extended with another seven years due to accusations of attacking a prison official. This time, thousands of people took to the streets in Baku calling for his release. This occurred despite the fact that protests in Azerbaijan are unusual and it showed that in the minds of the people demonstrating, the government had crossed a line. On 22 January 2019, Azerbaijan dropped the assault charge against Huseynov, and he was released from prison on 22 March 2019. This happened only after Huseynov had served the two-year sentence. Huseynov is currently seriously ill and has set up a fundraising campaign to cover his medical bills. The fundraising goal has been surpassed due to contributions of mostly Azerbaijani citizens.²⁰

2. Conclusion: building relationships of trust with communities of audiences as a means to protect journalism and journalists

The second part of this paper has looked at citizens taking an active role in defending journalism and journalists. Above we have identified five cases where audiences, and a larger representation of society, have engaged in the defence of media outlets and journalists under attack through the formation of 'pockets of resistance'. These cases show how community engagement and trust-building between the media and its audience creates 'pockets of resistance' that protect media and journalists from power abusers. These cases show, too, that in some instances these 'pockets of resistance' expand beyond the audience to a larger

¹⁹ IFEX (2020) Mehman Huseynov: the price of resistance. Available at: <https://ifex.org/faces/mehman-huseynov-the-price-of-resistance/>

²⁰ Human Rights House (2020) *Resisting media crackdown through self-publishing*. Available at: <https://humanrightshouse.org/interviews/resisting-media-crackdown-through-self-publishing/>

representation of society that defends journalists and media outlets against attacks. These groups of citizens believe in the civil role of journalism as fundamental for democratic and participatory societies where information provides relevant inputs for taking decisions about political, economic, cultural and social life and for holding governments accountable. It is within this broader conception of 'pockets of resistance' where the role of media and information literacy becomes relevant. Media and information literacy is not a mere academic exercise nor is it merely the acquisition of technical skills. More importantly, it is a civil and political response to the protection of the basic communicative nature of democracy. It is one that entails competing opinions, endless arguments and contestation, and only ever temporary, agreements. The point is that media and information literacy is a necessary civil and political skill by which an understanding of the value and worth of free and independent journalism is shared by the citizenry. In this way media and information literacy is an attribute of citizenship and in contexts where the media is threatened, media and information literate citizens, as we have argued above, can form 'pockets of resistance' to forces that seek to diminish free and independent journalism. This paper argues that further research into these 'pockets of resistance' is needed to fully understand what makes people stand up for and defend journalism and journalists, with the view that an attack on 'them' is an attack on 'all of us'. These 'pockets of resistance' show that there is a need to turn our attention to media and information literacy as a potential enabler of expressions of solidarity that formulate counter narratives to those rejecting the value of journalism and the peddling of public mistrust in journalism.

References

Alexander, J. C. (2006) *The Civil Sphere*. New York: Oxford University Press

Carey, J. W. (1992) A Cultural Approach to Communication. In *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*. New York: Routledge

Harrison, J. (2019a) *The Civil Power of the News*, London: Palgrave.

Harrison, J. (2019b) Public Service Journalism. In the *Oxford Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies*. Available at:

<https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-867?rskey=k7EbNY&result=105>

Hobbes, R. (2015) Media Literacy. In the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*.

Ireton, C. and Posetti, J. (2018) Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation. Handbook for Journalism Education and Training. Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/journalism_fake_news_disinformation_print_friendly_0.pdf

Newman, N. et al (2020) *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020*. Reuters Institute, University of Oxford. <http://www.digitalnewsreport.org/survey/2020/overview-key-findings-2020/>

Posetti, J. (2018) *Fighting back against prolific online harassment: Maria Ressa*. In An Attack on one is an attack on all: successful initiatives to protect journalists and combat impunity. UNESCO. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000250430>

Posetti, J. et al (2019) *What if scale breaks community? How to reboot audience engagement amid political attacks and platform capture*. 2019. Available at: <https://www.niemanlab.org/2019/10/what-if-scale-breaks-community-how-to-reboot-audience-engagement-amid-political-attacks-and-platform-capture/>

Posetti, Bell and Brown (2020) Journalism and the Pandemic. A Global Snapshot of Impacts: https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/Journalism%20and%20the%20Pandemic%20Project%20Report%201%202020_FINAL.pdf

Schütz, A. (1946) The well-informed citizen: An Essay on the Social Distribution of Knowledge. *Social Research*. Vol. 13, No. 4, pp. 463-478.

Silverstone, R. 2004 Regulation, media literacy and media civics. *Media Culture and Society*, 26(3), pp. 440-449.

Strömbäck, J. (2005) In search of a standard: Four models of democracy and their normative implications for journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 6(3), pp. 331-345.

Torsner, S. (2019) Profiling the Civil Diminishment of Journalism: A conceptual framework for understanding the causes and manifestations of risk to journalism. PhD Thesis. Available at: <http://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/25640/>

UN (2017) United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media, Organization of American States Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, and African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights Special Rapporteur on Freedom of

Expression and Access to Information. *Joint declaration on freedom of expression and “fake news,” disinformation and propaganda*. March 3. <http://www.osce.org/fom/302796>

UNESCO (2013a) Global Media and Information Literacy Assessment Framework: Country Readiness and Competencies. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000224655>

UNESCO (2013b) Media and information literacy: policy and strategy guidelines. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000225606>

UNESCO (2020a) New UNESCO Policy Briefs launched assessing the COVID-19 ‘Disinfodemic’. Available at: <https://en.unesco.org/news/new-unesco-policy-briefs-launched-assessing-covid-19-disinfodemic-0>

UNESCO (2020b) During this coronavirus pandemic, ‘fake news’ is putting lives at risk: UNESCO. Available at: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061592>

Wasserman, H. & Madrid-Morales, D. (2018). ‘Study sheds light on scourge of “fake” news in Africa’. *The Conversation*, 21 November 2018. <https://theconversation.com/study-sheds-light-on-scourgeof-fake-news-in-africa-106946>