

COP26 President keynote address at Society of Editors conference

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for having me here today.

They say that only two things in life are certain, death and taxes.

But to that list, I would add the tenacity and the rigour of the British press.

Whether it is war, or corruption, or injustice, or hypocrisy, or indeed a desire for greater transparency, you are unrelenting, uncompromising, and fearless in your pursuit of the truth, and in your determination to hold those in power to account.

I can tell you, from personal experience, being under the magnifying glass of the British press can be mildly uncomfortable.

Anyone remember "Air Miles Alok"?

Anyone from the Daily Mail here? Ok let's move on.

But however much it makes those under scrutiny squirm, I hope that you will never change.

Over the past year, I have been in 35 countries to persuade governments to up their climate commitments.

Because as you all know, better I think than anyone, you rarely land a story, or in my case a commitment, on the phone.

It needs to be face-to-face.

And on those visits I have been in very many newsrooms, I have been interviewed by your peers from Berlin to Brasilia, from Nairobi to New Delhi.

But rarely does anything evoke greater trepidation in politicians than walking into Milbank or indeed taking a call from a Fleet Street journalist.

And I have to say I think that is a credit to your industry, and the press freedom this country holds so dearly.

The question I really want to address today is what a future shaped by a changing climate means for reporting, and holding to account, by the British press.

Because that unfortunately is the future that we face.

Now you will be aware of this, but I think it's worth saying that scientific report after scientific report demonstrates that unless we get to grips with climate change, the effects will be catastrophic for people and nature.

Last year, we had a seminal report by the UN climate science body, the IPCC, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, noted that average global temperatures have risen by 1.1 degrees above preindustrial levels.

The report also concluded that human activity is unequivocally responsible for global warming.

This report was agreed by 195 countries, and its findings were based on the distillation of 14,000 scientific papers.

I can tell you from my own personal experience, getting almost 200 countries to agree on something this substantive is far from easy.

Now, there will be those who will say that 1.1 degrees does not sound like very much, but we see the impacts around the world.

Last year saw devastating floods across Europe and Asia.

Wildfires raged in North America and Australia.

And already this year India and Pakistan have been experiencing extreme heat waves, with some of the hottest months since records began.

Floods have killed hundreds in South Africa.

And the IPCC's latest reports published this year, tell us that due to climate change, ecosystems are being irreversibly destroyed, people are being forced from their homes, human health is being damaged, and water and food insecurity have increased.

I have seen this first hand.

I've met mountain communities in Nepal that have been forced to flee from their homes because of a combination of floods and droughts caused by the changing climate.

I've witnessed the effects of Hurricane Irma four years on in Barbuda.

Buildings lying derelict, roofs still blown off, walls crumbling, and people forced from their island homes due to climate change.

And talking to those affected is heartbreaking.

Because you get to not just see but you get to hear the human cost of a changing climate.

The reality is that climate change does not respect borders.

It impacts us all.

Here in the UK each of our top ten warmest years since 1884, have occurred since 2002.

Climate change is not a stand alone issue to be mitigated.

Unfortunately it exacerbates other existing risks.

These are what respected think tanks, like Chatham House, call the “systemic cascading risks” of global warming; the knock-on-effects resulting from climate change, such as food and water insecurity, pests, diseases, the loss of lives, livelihoods and infrastructure.

Indeed in one of its recent reports, Chatham House makes the case that such factors could, ultimately, displace people, disrupt markets, undermine political stability, and exacerbate conflict.

And, frankly, where people’s ability to feed their families becomes precarious and extreme weather and disease wipe out livelihoods, people may be forced from their homes, and civil unrest may foment,

events that can undermine fragile governments, and then ultimately reverberate around the globe.

It is because climate is central to geopolitics, that the UK’s Integrated Review established tackling climate change and biodiversity loss as the UK’s top international priority.

These impacts are happening today, and we know that in the future, they will become more severe.

Because unfortunately further temperature rises are now inevitable.

Even if we limit the rise in global temperature to 1.5 degrees celsius, the effects will be significant.

Yet there is still everything to play for, because the higher temperatures rise, the more extreme the effects become.

And every fraction of a degree makes a difference.

At 1.5 degrees warming, 700million people will be exposed to extreme heat around the world.

At 2 degrees it’s 2 billion people.

At 1.5 degrees, 70 percent of all coral reefs around the world would be destroyed.

At 2 degrees they are just about all gone.

But to keep that 1.5 degree limit alive we are going to have to halve global emissions by 2030.

And I think it’s worth saying that the cost of inaction is far, far greater than the cost of taking action now.

The Office for Budget Responsibility projects that unchecked climate change could lead to UK public debt reaching a staggering 289 percent of GDP by the end of the century.

But just as the science has become starker, the environmental and economic opportunities presented by tackling climate change have become clearer.

When the UK took on the role of hosting COP26, less than 30 percent of the global economy was covered by a net zero target.

By the time we got to COP26, with like minded partners around the world, we had persuaded 90 percent of the global economy to sign up to net zero.

So I would say that where the UK has led, others have followed.

Net zero is one of the clearest economic trends.

It encompasses just about every country and every sector.

As journalists, you are used to following the money.

So there is a reason why more than 7000 international companies have signed up to rigorous net zero targets.

There is a reason why, at COP26, financial institutions with over \$130 trillion dollars of assets on their balance sheets were signed up to net zero.

There is a reason why earlier this year Larry Fink, who as you know runs Black Rock, one of the biggest fund managers in the world, wrote to the CEOs of Black Rock's investee companies, and he noted:

that climate risk is investment risk, that there is a tectonic shift of capital underway, that sustainable investments have now reached \$4trillion, and that every company and every industry will be transformed by the transition to a net zero world.

Mr Fink went on to ask these investee companies whether they would lead this transition or whether they would be led.

And the reason for all of this is because businesses around the world can see the economic dividend from the pursuit of net zero.

It is clear to governments and businesses that the future of the global economy is clean.

And we must embrace the opportunities that presents.

But whether we do so fast enough or not, one thing is clear.

Climate change will define the future.

So it is rightly commanding increasing media attention.

Years ago, climate was a side issue for journalists specialising in international development or the environment.

Now it runs through many areas, from business, to culture, to sport, to

economics, to fashion, and of course politics.

Analysis by Carbon Brief, which focuses on climate, shows that the number of editorials in UK newspapers calling for more action to tackle climate change has quadrupled in three years.

And yes, scepticism has diminished.

That same analysis found that in 2011, right-leaning newspapers ran one editorial in favour of climate action for every five against.

By 2021, those same newspapers were publishing nine positive editorials for every one against.

Now, from my perspective, this focus is extremely welcome, but of course this year, climate is no longer in the spotlight.

COP26 is over, although of course our presidency year continues until November.

The headlines are understandably dominated by the other immense and immediate challenges facing the world.

Vladimir Putin's illegal and brutal invasion of Ukraine will define 2022.

And that is rightly the focus of the media and the international community.

And I understand that you've just had a discussion panel on Ukraine and reflected on the journalists who have very sadly lost their lives, and of course I pay tribute to all of them.

And of course, governments must also address the global crisis in energy markets and increasing inflation and its attendant impacts.

And again, the media is naturally focusing on this.

And actually it is quite interesting that, the current crisis has also made clear to governments that homegrown renewables and clean energy,

the price of which cannot be manipulated from afar, are the best option for domestic energy security.

Climate security has become synonymous with energy security.

And the chronic threat of climate change is unfortunately not going away.

And so journalists are vital to ensure it continues to receive the column inches and the air time that it deserves, and that leaders are held to account.

Because world leaders have committed to tackle climate change.

Almost seven years ago, countries forged the Paris Agreement.

And in this they committed to limit the average rise in global temperature to well below two degrees, pursuing efforts towards 1.5.

Last year at COP26, nations agreed the historic Glasgow Climate Pact that showed how we will deliver this.

And countries agreed to revisit and strengthen their 2030 emissions reduction targets this year, to align them with the Paris temperature goals.

They agreed to phasedown coal power and phase out fossil fuel subsidies.

And they agreed that the developed countries would provide more finance to support developing nations to deal with climate change.

Alongside the Glasgow Climate Pact, companies and countries made commitments at COP26 to clean up critical sectors, to halt deforestation, and to work together to accelerate green technologies.

In short, the world has agreed what it needs to do. Our task now is to deliver.

And to achieve that, we need you to do what you do best, and hold governments and businesses to account.

The British media has significant international clout.

Editorials written here are read with keen interest in capitals around the globe.

You help focus the eyes of the world on those in positions of responsibility, to scrutinise whether or not they deliver on their commitments.

And if they do not, you have the tools to hold them to account.

We also need you to help people understand the reality of climate impacts.

And help them make informed choices.

And of course, we need you to interrogate objectively the benefits of the move to clean economies.

Ladies and gentleman, I believe that the chronic threat of climate change, and its expansive impact, will increasingly be the biggest story of the twenty-first century.

I will go further.

I would argue it will ultimately be the biggest story in many of our lifetimes.

And we need you to tell it.

And we need you to shape it.

By continuing to do what you do best.

Speak truth to power.

Report on the reality of the world around us.

These are the finest qualities of the British press.

So whatever the future of news, they must endure.

Thank you.