

Speech: Britain champions free speech, so we're leading the war on fake news: article by Jeremy Hunt

John Stuart Mill stands among the greatest and most optimistic champions of freedom who lived. As long ago as 1859, he wrote: "The time, it is to be hoped, is gone by when any defence would be necessary of the liberty of the press as one of the securities against corrupt or tyrannical government."

Sadly, the argument that Mill thought settled is still raging in many parts of the world. This year, 62 journalists have been murdered and hundreds more locked up for no offence save doing their jobs. The appalling killing of Jamal Khashoggi on October 2 provides more evidence of the risks that many journalists are forced to run.

Defending a free media must therefore be a central element of British foreign policy, in keeping with our country's role as an invisible chain linking the nations that share our values.

I write as a politician and, like many in my profession, I do not always enjoy reading what the newspapers say about me. The media sometimes make mistakes and journalists, being human, are not beyond hyperbole and excess. But none of us would wish to live in a country where newspapers are muzzled or controlled. A media willing and able to investigate wrongdoing, expose failures and criticise the mighty, provides one of the strongest defences against corruption and arbitrary state power.

The Foreign Office has always sought to encourage good governance and defeat corruption. Promoting a free media is an essential part of achieving both goals. This is not mere assertion or guesswork. Hard evidence shows a striking overlap between the countries with the least corruption and the countries with the freest media.

If you take the 10 cleanest nations in the world, as ranked by Transparency International UK in 2017, 6 of them also appear in the top 10 of the Press Freedom Index.

And the correlation holds at the other end of the scale. Of the 10 most corrupt countries in the world, 4 are also in the bottom 10 when it comes to press freedom.

It takes no great leap of the imagination to understand why. Powerful people will be deterred from abusing their positions if there is a good chance of their behaviour being exposed. The opposite is obviously true: if there is no risk of being found out by the media – or if you can reach a level where you gain immunity from scrutiny – then the powerful are far more likely to develop the sense of impunity that leads to corruption.

Next year, I will host an international conference in London on media freedom. My aim is to bring together the countries which believe in this cause in order to mobilise a consensus behind the protection of journalists. Britain will be a chain that links the nations who share our values.

We cannot physically prevent journalists from being locked up in other countries. But if governments choose to jail them without good reason, we can alert global public opinion and impose a diplomatic price.

British embassies routinely lobby their host governments if serious violations of media freedom occur – and I take up individual cases myself. When I met Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader, I [raised the plight of 2 Reuters journalists](#) imprisoned after reporting from Rakhine State, where more than 700,000 Rohingya Muslim refugees have been driven from their homes since 2017.

Diplomats from our embassy in Burma attended the trials of the journalists and our ambassador spoke out against the guilty verdict.

We also support media freedom projects through our Fund for Human Rights and Democracy, named after Magna Carta. We are helping to train journalists in Ethiopia, where a new prime minister has promised a more enlightened approach, and in Venezuela, where an authoritarian government has suppressed its critics. We will seek to expand the number of journalists receiving training, including in newsrooms here in the UK.

In the era of fake news and concerted propaganda by hostile states, supporting a free media also means countering the incoming tides of disinformation. While it has never been easier to publish and receive information, it has also never been easier to spread lies and conspiracy theories. Social media offers a malign opportunity to whip up hatred and incite violence against vulnerable minorities.

So Britain is helping to lead the struggle against propaganda and the misuse of the internet. This year, the government is providing £8.5 million for this essential work in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

All of this serves our goal of promoting good governance wherever possible. Yet, in the end, I believe a British Foreign Secretary should defend the free media, not primarily for reasons of policy, but because this is part of what our country stands for. Democracy, the rule of law and freedom of expression mean nothing unless independent journalists are able to hold the powerful to account, however inconvenient this might be for those who find themselves on the receiving end.

A free media is part of the assembly of values in which this country believes, making us an invisible chain that links together like-minded nations.

One day, I hope John Stuart Mill's optimism will be vindicated and there will no longer be any need to defend this cause. Until then, we must do whatever we can to safeguard and promote a free media.