

Abstract submission

2019 Future of Journalism Conference: Innovations, Transitions and Transformations
Cardiff University, September 12-13th, 2019

Defining ‘freedom of the press’: A cross-national analysis of press council codes of ethics

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Abstract

‘Freedom of the press’ has always been a contested concept: whether posited in terms of market rationality or as the lifeblood of an idealised democratic community. This paper examines key issues of central concern to press freedom and this conference: the changing definitions of journalism and the news ecology, technological liminality within journalism practice and of course how journalism ethics that underpin the boundaries of press freedom are reconfigured within these new spaces. Moreover, questions regarding the transformation of journalism in terms of its functions, role, ethical bases and how these might be regulated, are central to our AHRC-funded interdisciplinary research project: Defining Freedom of the Press (AH/R00644X/1). This paper presents initial findings focussing on cross-national comparisons of journalism ethics and regulation in thirteen countries that score highly on measures of press freedom. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis and concepts from the field of applied ethics, our interdisciplinary findings emphasise the extent to which the ethics codes and regulatory culture of each of our thirteen countries claim to serve four functions common to professional codes of practice outside of journalism: to be action-guiding, disciplinary, public-facing and to encourage solidarity among members of the professional community. Given that the protected status of journalism as a profession hinges on the maintenance of boundaries, this research furthers our understanding of how codes of ethics contribute to the discursive construction of journalism as a profession.