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**Defining freedom of the press in the 21st century:
Interdisciplinary approaches and comparative perspectives**

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Abstract

This presentation will detail the rationale, conceptual underpinnings and methodological approach of a major Research Council's United Kingdom (RCUK) funded interdisciplinary study aiming to provide a non-partisan yet 'integrated' formulation of freedom of the press. The paper will outline preliminary findings from this ongoing project as well as initial reflections on the data gathered thus far. In providing the rationale for the project, the authors signal the central problem of concern for the research as one of attempting to reconcile the tension between normative ethical considerations of news production with the practicalities of regulating news work. As such, the principle and practices of press freedom operate on different conceptual planes within ethical frameworks struggling to fit into or relate to applied contexts (Eberwien, et al, 2011). Evidence of this tension can be observed in the debate about press ethics and 'responsible journalism', as many argue the 'freedom of the press' often goes beyond the realms of responsible news work (Schlosberg, 2013) as headlines targeting minority groups, vulnerable individuals, public figures and victims of crime continue to fill the front pages and websites of major news organisations in the UK. Moreover, the online environment has generated a new set of practical and ethical challenges for news organisations and journalists as the distinction between 'professional' and 'non-professional' becomes increasingly blurred (Beckett, 2010). Significantly, the new architecture for press regulation is being developed within a context of what is still a very inward-facing discussion about the UK experience. We argue that the isolationism that has characterised the UK debates about press ethics has hitherto hindered the possibility of benchmarking and learning from other societies in which problems of ethics and regulation have seemingly been addressed by legislators, journalists and the general public. By examining the top ranked European nations in the World Press Freedom index, this study is developing a set of evidence-based recommendations that will be used to benchmark the UK press codes of ethics. Our research will also provide a clear and functioning definition of freedom of the press that is anchored within normative ethics and applied practice; one that is anchored in empirical research and which steps outside of the usual disciplinary boundaries. Indeed, the research adopts a multi-disciplinary approach that combines methodological elements from different disciplines including applied philosophy, applied linguistics, media law, political communication, cultural studies, media history and of course journalism studies.

Stage one of the study is based upon a rigorous analysis of the various codes of journalism ethics and regulatory mechanisms of the top twelve European countries in the World Press

freedom rankings in order to challenge dominant, often negative perspectives from those in the UK news industry who have consistently obfuscated the debate about the appropriate role and scope of the press and its means of regulation. Drawing on a critical discourse analysis and concepts from the field of applied ethics, we emphasise the extent to which the ethics codes and regulatory culture of each of our 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 professional boundaries, this element of our research furthers understandings of how codes of ethics contribute to the discursive construction of journalism as a profession as well as its practices.

In discussing stage two of the project, we go on to outline findings which have been drawn from interviews with 43 journalists and news-workers from six of our study countries: Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the UK. Utilising a phenomenographic approach (Marton, 1981; Åkerlind, 2012) we discuss journalists' perceptions of the contribution of ethics codes of practice in their everyday journalistic practice. We also build an understanding of journalists' shared experiences of what constitutes 'press freedom' in their cultural setting. In addition to the perspectives of journalists and news-workers, we also outline preliminary findings from interviews with non-journalist representatives from NGOs whose work intersects with journalism practice and press ethics. Taking a non-media centric approach is an important contribution of our overall research strategy as it is concerned with understanding how news workers and civil society actors understand and practice freedom of the press within a variety of cultural contexts. In discussing stage three of the project, we go on to outline the processes and preliminary findings of our stakeholder workshops (Nielsen, Bryndum & Bedsted, 2017) that have been conducted in order to stimulate deliberative responses to emergent issues and themes that were raised in phase two of the project. Stakeholder workshops are a response to the requirement for more active deliberative contributions (Sheppard & Meitner, 2005) from beyond the hitherto relatively narrow range of voices from the journalism industry, on journalism ethics. Stakeholders involved in these workshops range from third sector advocacy organisations related to those working in often marginalised communities - migrant rights, LGBTQ+ advocacy, the Traveller movement and anti-discrimination advocates, to digital news innovators and the 'traditional' journalism sector.

In combination with our multi-disciplinary analysis, these three research activities will feed into our fourth and final stage of research which are the capacity building workshops which involve existing participants and user groups and representatives of minority rights organisations. These workshops will be spaces where preliminary findings of previous stages of the research will be discussed and developed in order to develop a more refined and concrete set of recommendations and codes of practice can be developed.

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