**Journalists' Views on International Media Freedom Campaigns: Empty Rhetoric or Strategic Narratives?**


## Abstract

What do journalists think of the international media freedom campaigns that aim to support them? How might their perspectives help us better understand the potential impacts of such initiatives? This article addresses these under-researched questions by interviewing 37 journalists in Sudan and the Philippines about their experiences of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC): a group of 51 states working collaboratively to promote media freedom. We found these journalists were largely unaware of the MFC, and highly sceptical that it would make a difference. However, surprisingly, most were supportive of its work. This was because they valued the 'strategic narratives' it provided and the signals these sent to their political leaders as well as the 'morale boost' they gave journalists. These findings highlight the importance of strategic narratives as a key component of international advocacy and demonstrate that audiences do not necessarily have to agree with them to support them.



## Keywords

Sudan; the Philippines; media freedom; strategic narratives; international advocacy

Around the world, media freedom is in steady decline. Between 2015 and 2024, the number of countries with a 'good' press freedom situation declined by 69 percent - from 26 to just 8 countries (RSF, 2024). Similarly, a UNESCO (2021) study found that 85 percent of the world's population experienced a decline in press freedom in their country between 2016 and 2021.

In response, several new intergovernmental initiatives supporting media freedom have been established. Major examples include the US-led Summits for Democracy in 2021, 2023 and 2024, which focussed heavily on supporting free and independent media, and the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) which was established in 2019 by the UK and Canada. The MFC, which is the focus of this study, is a partnership of 51 governments working collaboratively to promote media freedom through advocacy, diplomatic interventions, international events, and funding. In its first two years, the MFC adopted a 'resource light' and diplomatic approach to supporting media freedom, focussed largely on protecting individual journalists from physical and legal attacks by state authorities (Scott et al., 2023, p. 87).

While these multilateral, diplomatic initiatives have been broadly welcomed by the international media development community, they have also criticised them for failing to 'turn words into action' (SoE, 2020, para. 1). Currently, just 0.3 percent of official development assistance is spent on media support (Myers & Gilberds, 2024). International civil society organisations also frequently encourage the MFC to take 'stronger and more concrete actions to defend media freedom' (CPJ, 2022 para. 1) rather than just releasing public statements. For example, in December 2023 the MFC published a statement 'express[ing] their concern' about the plight of journalists in Israel and Gaza (MFC, 2023, para. 1). But they were accused by a coalition of 42 media freedom and journalist organisations of taking 'no credible action… to protect journalists in Gaza' (PMA, 2024, para. 1).

But what do the individual journalists who are supposed to benefit from international media freedom campaigns think of them? Their voices are often missing from debates about the design, focus and effectiveness of such initiatives. This absence is highly problematic because media support initiatives are more effective when they fully engage with the views, cultures, and priorities of the stakeholders they seek to assist. Historical attempts to support media freedom have also often been closely tied to the self-interest of the states that initiate them (e.g. McBride, 1980). Hence, it is crucial to re-centre the views of journalists themselves within our understandings of international media freedom campaigns.

In this article, we aim to achieve this by examining what journalists in two MFC priority countries thought about the MFC and its work, during its first two years. In the following section, we show that previous studies have often regarded international media freedom campaigns as ineffective because declines in media freedom often continue unabated. We then argue that the concept of 'strategic narratives' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle, 2013) might provide a more nuanced way of understanding the aims and potential impacts of these initiatives, and of interpreting journalists' perspectives on them. Next, we provide details of the interviews we conducted with 37 journalists in Sudan and the Philippines in 2020 and 2021, and with 50 wider stakeholders in these two countries. In our analysis, we show that these journalists were largely unaware of the MFCs existence and, when it was explained, highly sceptical that its activities would make any difference to media freedom in their country. However, despite their scepticism, most were still very supportive of the MFC's approach because they valued the 'strategic narratives' it produced. Journalists in both countries felt that the MFC could emphasise the value of media freedom to their respective governments far more effectively than domestic actors. They also described the MFC as providing an important 'morale boost' because it described threats to their work as worthy of international condemnation.

This article makes three major contributions. First, it provides rare empirical data about how journalists perceive international media freedom campaigns. As we discuss in the conclusion, this can help to ensure such campaigns are better designed and evaluated in the future. Second, it is the first to describe and analyse media freedom campaigns as a form of 'strategic narrative'. This is an important theoretical development because we demonstrate that this analytical approach provides a valuable lens for explaining the interactions between the activities of elites on the international stage, and their interpretation by local practitioners. This conceptual framework also helps us identify several potential unintended consequences associated with the strategic narratives of international advocacy campaigns. Finally, the study makes an important contribution to the growing literature on strategic narratives, by showing that audiences do not necessarily have to agree with the content of strategic narratives to support them.

## 1.0 International media freedom campaigns as empty rhetoric

Previous studies of international advocacy campaigns and the normative standards and expectations they seek to reinforce, frequently highlight their apparent failure to drive concrete improvements on the ground. For example, the increasingly common tactic of naming-and-shaming governments that violate the rights of their citizens - which the MFC practices via its public statements – is often regarded as likely to have only limited impact. Terman (2023, p. 1), for example, shows that, in many cases, international condemnation from the international community, 'not only fails to induce compliance but also incites a backlash, provoking resistance and worsening human rights practices'.

Within the field of International Relations more generally, it is regularly observed that there is an 'implementation gap' between states' public commitments to international norms and their actual policies and actions (Risse & Sikkink, 2013). This 'gap' is often attributed to

a lack of associated enforcement mechanisms. Local civil society actors are understood to be vital for 'translating' international norms into domestic contexts, and for helping to promote their enforcement by pressuring states to fulfil their commitments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). However, such advocacy is usually extremely challenging because of a lack of political will and/or state capacity (Risse & Sikkink, 2013). Unfortunately, it is not clear how well this approach applies to international advocacy for media freedom because International Relations scholarship, 'makes scant reference to… journalists', and when it does, refers to them simply as, 'something to be harnessed by CSOs and NGOs' (Mitchell, 2025, p. 11), rather than as a unique feature of civil society facing distinct threats and requiring particular protections.

Within media studies, there is a relatively large body of work examining the threats to media freedom in different countries, which is often informed by the views and experiences of journalists. For example, the increased violations of press freedom during the Duterte government in the Philippines (2016-2022) have been well documented, including by Bagalawis et al. (2024) whose interviews with journalists highlight how various forms of government attacks combined with COVID-19 restrictions to trigger multiple forms of fear amongst journalists. Similarly, in Sudan, the high levels of journalistic censorship and self-censorship, stemming from 'restrictive laws, [and] economic pressures' (Hamid & Ramdani, 2020, p. 1536) during the regime of Omar al-Bashir (1989-2019), have been well established. However, journalists' experiences after the fall of Omar al-Bashir in April 2019, both during Sudan's transitional government and since the start of Sudan's civil war in April 2023, have been less well documented.

Unfortunately, within this work, the role of international media freedom campaigns is often either overlooked or seen as a minor component of wider journalistic protection strategies. For example, in the studies of Sudan and the Philippines discussed above, the only

mention of international advocacy is a reference by Bagalawis et al. (2024) to changes in RSF's ranking of the Philippines in its annual World Press Freedom Index. Furthermore, Lamer (2018, p. 115) argues that, despite the best efforts of organisations like RSF, the impact of the advocacy efforts of international NGOs on media freedom's status as an institutional norm 'seems… limited' due to their relatively limited financial and human resources.

A few studies of international media campaigns do draw on journalistic testimonies. These have generally concluded that campaigns are relatively ineffective because official commitments to international norms do not correlate with improvements on the ground. For example, in her study of journalists' responses to attacks against them in Mexico and Honduras, Mitchell (2025, p. 10) finds that most journalists did value the international strategies employed on their behalf either because they provided a 'source of solidarity and hope' or because they 'provided additional avenues for exerting pressure on the state'. However, she also documents a widespread 'disillusionment' and belief that they ultimately 'had little impact' because international strategies are, 'unlikely to generate genuine political will on the part of governments where it does not already exist' (Mitchell, 2025, p. 26). Similarly, in their study of responses to anti-press violence in Mexico, Relly and González de Bustamante (2017, p. 135) found that while transnational and domestic organisational networks can work together to 'exert continuous pressure for institutional change', it is 'unclear' whether this has influenced the political will or budgetary support required to actively support media freedom.

As these examples illustrate, the existing literature focusses heavily on Latin American contexts, and especially Mexico, and on the (in)effectiveness of international advocacy in general, rather than on the outcomes of specific initiatives. Furthermore, they tend to assume that unless 'norms adopted… on paper… lead to concrete improvements in

freedom of expression and journalists' safety' (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2017, p. 138), then international media freedom campaigns have 'had little impact' (ibid). In the following section, we argue that the concept of 'strategic narratives' offers another way of thinking about the impact of international media freedom campaigns, which may offer a more useful lens with which to interpret journalists' perspectives.

**2.0 International media freedom campaigns as strategic narratives**

Constructivist approaches to international relations recognise the critical role of ideas and language in shaping international affairs, and a growing scholarship describes the importance of 'strategic narratives' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle 2013; Roselle, Miskimmon, & O'Loughlin 2014). Strategic narratives are 'a means by which political actors attempt to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors' (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle., 2017, p. 6). The accuracy of strategic narratives is not necessarily relevant: what matters is the appeal they have to particular audiences, and how their representation of issues shape practice (Schmitt, 2018). Unlike the concept of 'frames', narratives places particular emphasis on the importance of temporality and the causal relationships between the component parts of communications (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, & Roselle., 2017, p. 6). Narratives become 'strategic' when state and non-state actors create and promote narratives that serve their interests; and because these narratives then provide 'plots for political action' (Miskimmon et al 2014, cited in Lerner & O'Loughlin 2023, p.5). One widely discussed example of an influential strategic narrative is the construction of al-Qaeda in the context of the 'War on Terror'. As Lerner and O'Loughlin (2023 p. 6) explain, in the wake of 9/11, the Bush administration's narratives represented the group as a coherent international actor, sponsored by the state of Afghanistan. This framed Afghanistan as the embodiment of the

group, against whom the US-led coalition could then wage a 'War on Terror'. Alternative narratives would have legitimised very different policy responses.

Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014) propose three, overlapping types of strategic narratives: 1) those which set out why a policy is needed and desirable, and how it will be successfully implemented, 2) narratives that tell the story of the nation state and its goals, and 3) International System Narratives that describe how the world is structured, who the players are, and how it works. Previous research has described the dominant narratives contained within, and promoted by, the MFC in its first two years (Scott et al., 2023). These narratives relate to all three of Roselle, Miskimmon and O'Loughlin's (2014) categories. First, the MFC diagnosed 'the problem' as declining media freedom, globally, and 'the culprit' as authoritarian states (rather than threats from large platform companies, for example). This state-centric narrative created a 'plot' that legitimized a narrow, reactive, and 'resource-light' approach to supporting media freedom, focused on diplomatic efforts targeting countries outside the Coalition (Scott et al., 2023). Second, the MFC told a national story for its member states, narrating them as exemplars of media freedom, democracy, and human rights and as democracy defenders. For example, in 2021, then UK Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab (2021, para. 2) described being co-chair of the MFC as helping the UK to 'play… a critical role as a champion of open, democratic societies, human rights and the rule of law'. This was a strategically useful narrative for the UK during the first Trump Presidency and in a post-Brexit world. Third, the MFC offered International System Narratives that drew a clear distinction between increasingly powerful, rule-breaking, authoritarian countries responsible for a decline in the rules-based international order and democratic, rule-abiding countries seeking to stop them.

Strategic narratives are related to the concept of social norms. However, there are important differences. Norms are a form of shared understandings about appropriate

behaviour and are premised on shared ontological commitments (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998). Strategic narratives, by contrast, can 'speak to the very elements included in international political discourses, providing a basis upon which normative assessments can be made' (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5). For example, while a social norm might denote that a 'good' democratic state will not attack or arbitrarily detain journalists, a strategic narrative can contain positions on more fundamental questions such as: 'who is a journalist?', 'what is freedom?' and 'who are the champions of journalistic freedom?'. For example, Palmer (2021, p. 95) has shown that, during the Covid pandemic, the digital discourses of three international media freedom organisations 'remained remarkably silent on press freedom violations happening within the nations where they are based, while representing nations outside the West as the central places in which press freedom was under brutal attack'. In doing so, they told a clear story about which countries are seen as a media freedom champions.

Lerner and O'Loughlin (2023, p. 11) add that strategic narratives can also be 'ontologically productive' because they can change how actors see the international system, in ways that prevail beyond a single issue or context. This happens when a strategic narrative contains 'novel elements' which are then adopted by other actors. The authors give the example of how the concept of 'war reparations' changed in the wake of World War II. Previously, reparations were seen as a form of 'victor's justice' where the losing party was meant to repay the costs of the war. In the 1950s, however, they became understood as a form of compensation for human rights abuses and an element of international reconciliation. This happened because of the 'ontologically productive' debates surrounding the Luxembourg reparations agreement in 1952. Although those debates happened in a specific context, they impacted much wider understandings of state responsibility (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023). The MFC's strategic narratives also contain 'novel elements' which may potentially be

'ontologically productive', such as the idea that states are morally obliged to publicly condemn countries that violate media freedom.

While there is a large and growing literature on the role of strategic narratives within international relations, there is limited research on their reception. Hagström and Gustafsson (2021, p. 418) characterise the existing research as 'agent centric' because it focuses primarily on actors who make and disseminate strategic narratives. Schmitt's (2018) study of the reception of Russian strategic narratives in France is one exception. He finds that strategic narratives are more likely to be accepted by an audience when they resonate with their local political myths.

Studying Sudanese and Filipino journalists' perceptions of the MFC in 2020 and 2021 is likely to generate further useful insights into the reception of strategic narratives because both countries were a key focus of the MFC – albeit for very different reasons. At the time, Sudan had a transitional government, comprised of both civilian and military representatives, and reform of the media was a key component of the country's tentative democratic transition. Sudan's transitional constitution included provisions guaranteeing freedom of the press and in 2020, Sudan rose 16 places on RSF's World Press Freedom Rankings - to 159th out of 180 (RSF, 2020). In this context, Sudan's membership of the MFC was seen as a way of rewarding the government for their apparent commitment to media freedom and incentivising further reforms. In 2020, Sudan also received financial support from the British Embassy, as part of its commitment to the MFC, to help develop a UNESCO-led 'Media Reform Roadmap'.

By contrast, in 2019-2021, the Philippines was experiencing a decline in media freedom. It dropped two places to 136th in RSF's 2020 World Press Freedom Rankings (RSF, 2020). Then President, Rodrigo Duterte had a well-documented antagonistic approach to independent journalism, which fuelled a broader climate of harassment and intimidation of

journalists. In this context, the MFC felt that international pressure could help prevent further declines in media freedom. In July 2020, the MFC published a joint statement expressing 'concern' about 'the increasing restrictions on freedom of the press in the Philippines' (MFC, 2020, para. 1). MFC members also engaged government and civil society organisations in support of a 'National Action Plan on Media Freedom'. The Philippines was not a member of the MFC. Thus, Sudanese and Filipino journalists' perspectives on the MFC can help us understand the impact of contrasting approaches taken by the same international media freedom campaign.

## 3.0 Methodology

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 37 journalists - 17 in Sudan and 20 in the Philippines - to understand their views on the MFC during its first two years (2019-2021). Table 1 provides details of their seniority and gender, and the geographic focus and primary medium of the news outlets these journalists worked for. In both countries, respondents were purposefully targeted to include senior individuals currently or recently employed as professional journalists, by the most influential public/state and private media, both nationally and locally.

To contextualise our interviews with journalists, we also conducted 50 further interviews with a wider range of stakeholders in Sudan (20) and the Philippines (30). Table 2 provides further details of the types of organisations these interviewees worked for and their gender. In Sudan, we purposefully selected individuals who were closely associated with national media reform at the time, regardless of their affiliation with the MFC. In the Philippines, half of respondents were targeted because they were directly affiliated with the MFC and its activities. The other half were targeted because they were directly involved in international media support in general. Interviews with both sets of respondents in Sudan

were conducted in either Arabic (16) or English (21), and took place either in person, in Khartoum (19), or via phone calls (18). In the Philippines, all interviews took place via online calls and were conducted in either English or mixed Filipino and English.

Table 1: Profile of journalists interviewed in Sudan and the Philippines

| | Sudan | The Philippines |
|---|---|---|
| News medium | Print (6)<br>Television (3)<br>Radio (1)<br>Digital (1)<br>Freelancers/other (6) | Print (9)<br>Television (9)<br>Digital (2) |
| Geographic focus | International (2)<br>National (13)<br>Local/community (2) | National (16)<br>Local/community (4) |
| Seniority | Director/senior editor (6)<br>Journalists (11) | Director/senior editor (8)<br>Journalists (12) |
| Gender | Female (4)<br>Male (13) | Female (11)<br>Male (9) |

Table 2: Profile of additional stakeholders interviewed in Sudan and the Philippines

| | Sudan | The Philippines |
|---|---|---|
| Professional affiliation | International NGO (8)<br>National civil society organisation (6) | National civil society organisation (12)<br>International NGO (4) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | Foreign embassy (3)<br>Multi-lateral organisation (2)<br>The transitional government (1) | University (4)<br>Foreign embassy (8)<br>Multi-lateral organisation (1)<br>Government (1) |
| Gender | Female (10)<br>Male (10) | Female (17)<br>Male (13) |

All interviews were caried out between August 2020 and April 2021 and lasted between thirty and sixty minutes. Respondents were recruited via direct approaches and our existing professional networks. Our semi-structured interview format involved asking respondents questions about their understandings of media freedom, experiences of national and international support for media freedom, awareness of and engagement with the MFC, and perceptions of its likely impact. Anonymity was assured for all participants. Ethical approval was obtained from City St George's, University of London. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated to English.

Informed by constructivist grounded theory, we analysed our data via a two-phase process (see Charmaz, 2014). Initial coding involved a segment-by-segment reading of interview transcripts to identify provisional themes. Subsequently, our focussed coding involved consolidating and prioritising the most significant codes to identify the most salient themes. Throughout, we found memo-writing and regular discussions within the research team to be particularly useful for identifying patterns in our data (see Charmaz, 2014).

## 4.0 Findings

### *4.1 Had journalists heard of the MFC?*

There were relatively low levels of awareness of the MFC amongst journalists in both countries. In the Philippines, only two of the twenty journalists we interviewed (ten percent) were already aware of the MFC, and none were familiar with its public statement expressing concern about declining in media freedom in the Philippines (MFC, 2020). Although some journalists were aware of specific activities carried out by the embassies of MFC member states, they did not associate these with the MFC. Awareness of the MFC was also extremely limited amongst the wider set of stakeholders we interviewed, who were not directly affiliated with the MFC. As a representative of one multi-lateral organisation asked, 'who are these Coalition [members]?... I don't know if they have any kind of activities... They haven't approached us' (P24). Even those who were aware of the MFC felt it was largely unknown. As one civil society representative put it, 'I think I recall I came across it, but it's not seen as this global campaign... I don't know [if] I would call it a brand' (P21).

The MFC had made some efforts to consult relevant stakeholders in the Philippines. In particular, the UK embassy carried out multiple private meetings and discussions with journalists, government officials, media freedom organizations and businesses around the country, in early 2020. Indeed, one journalist who was aware of the MFC told us they learnt about it via 'gatherings in the ambassador's residence' (P14). The UK embassy had also hosted roundtable discussions involving different stakeholders and partnered with local universities to run public events. However, these actions were not sustained, and few other embassies involved in the MFC took such actions.

In Sudan, awareness of the MFC was also low. Only four of the seventeen journalists we interviewed (24 percent) had heard of the MFC and were aware that Sudan was a member. Furthermore, these four journalists all said that the information they had about it was fleeting and vague and came almost exclusively from the Sudanese government. As one journalist put it, 'I am the editor of one of the biggest papers in the country, but I have [been

given] no information about this. No communication at all' (S5). Another said that they had, 'heard that the prime minister has signed an agreement [to join the MFC], but... I did not get the information as a journalist that there is a campaign about media freedom' (S9).

Although few had heard of the MFC itself, all except one of the Sudanese journalists we interviewed had heard of the Media Reform Roadmap, which had been supported by the UK as part of its MFC commitments. This roadmap had been developed via a multi-stakeholder reform process, involving 13 workshops, 66 expert meetings and a 200-person working group. Indeed, several civil society representatives who participated in this process described it as 'useful' (S26), 'ambitious' (S22) and 'inclusive in some aspects, because it engages the post-revolution government, and the Sudanese Journalists Network' (S29). However, others expressed reservations about the breadth and longevity of its consultations, characterising it as 'made in a hurry' (S28) and 'a very nice document... [but] lacking in terms of actual ownership... and commitment to it' (S25).

Despite widespread awareness of the roadmap, few journalists associated it with the MFC. As one journalist told us, 'I know for sure that the UK and Canada are on board in terms of media freedom. But I cannot confirm to you if [the roadmap] is under the MFC' (S2). In summary, despite some degree of outreach, journalists in both Sudan and the Philippines were largely unaware of the MFC. In both countries, there also appears to have been relatively limited consultation with journalists on the design of the MFC's activities.

### *4.2 Perceptions of the MFC's likely impact*

Journalists in Sudan and the Philippines were also very sceptical that the MFC would improve media freedom in their countries. However, this scepticism was largely due to their appreciation of the many other factors which shape media freedom, rather than direct criticisms of the MFC itself.

In Sudan**,** journalists told us that the MFC's likely success was determined by a wide range of factors well outside the MFC's control. As one journalist put it, 'the international community can push as much as it wants but it's not in the hands of consultants' (S4). For example, interviewees consistently argued that the MFC would struggle to encourage the civilian government to prioritise the issue of media freedom, at a time when it was facing many other significant challenges associated with democratic transition and transitional justice. One journalist told us,

> Since they've come to power, the transitional government have just been putting out fires - the economy, a cholera outbreak, the tribal conflict in eastern Sudan, the Covid-19 emergency and now the floods, so they have not been able to prioritise... media freedom (S7).

Furthermore, even if the civilian government did gain the political will necessary for improving media freedom, due to pressure from the MFC, its ability to implement legal and other reforms was significantly constrained. Journalists explained that the state was 'not a magic apparatus that could do everything' (S12) because it was constrained by weak institutional capacity, former regime members opposed to reform, and political uncertainty. For example, several interviewees attributed the stalled implementation of the MFC-funded roadmap to a cabinet reshuffle and a subsequent change in the Minister of Information. Most significantly, though, interviewees stressed that, at the time, the transnational government was reluctant to pursue reforms to media freedom because this would either be blocked by, or increase tensions with the military, with whom it was sharing power. As one journalist said,

> The military will always view the media as their enemy. So, if you are in a country where the military is… able to call the shots, you will never have free media. I don't care how many nice statements the prime minister makes (S15).

This journalist went on to argue that the transnational government, 'are not trying to reform the media... because they are scared of the military, and they want to make sure that this partnership works out and that we can go through the transitional period without a coup' (S15).

Several Sudanese journalists also felt that the MFC's likely impact was constrained by the limited capacity of civil society organisations to hold the government accountable to its commitments as an MFC member. In this context, they blamed neither the government, nor the MFC, for the likely limits to the MFC's impact but the 'weakness in the journalistic institutions' (S14) in Sudan. As one journalist put it, 'there should be monitoring mechanisms from civil society to see if things are being implemented or not. It is not the prime minister's fault. It is the fault of the people who should be following up on this work' (S17). In doing so, they drew attention to various other forms of support required to improve media freedom in Sudan, in addition to the MFC's activities. This included journalistic capacity building via direct financial support and journalist training, but also wider issues such as supporting media literacy, universal internet access, updated university curricula, more female journalists in leadership roles, more evenly distributed government advertising, cheaper printing facilities, reduced concentration of ownership and higher wages. As one journalist said, 'if you can't earn your own bread, you can't decide for yourself' (S1). In this context, the MFC's interventions were seen, not only as unlikely to achieve significant and/or long-term impact, but a 'drop in the ocean' (S8) compared to what was required.

In the Philippines, most journalists were equally sceptical that the MFC would significantly influence the governments' actions. As one journalist said, 'although now is the best time to be talking about media freedom as this is a [political] transition year... whether it will have an impact on the administration, I do not think so' (P6). The main reason given for this scepticism was a perception that President Duterte in particular, was not susceptible diplomatic pressure. For example, a journalist told us that, 'the President does not really listen to anyone. He is 78 years old. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks' (P12). Another agreed, saying, 'most likely, Duterte will simply, curse them' (P20). Similarly, one ambassador we interviewed said that 'I'm sure they do huff and puff but... I can't readily think of an example where a statement from the Coalition has provoked a negative reaction from the government here' (P32). Several journalists added that 'with this type of government' (P15), international pressure would be significantly stronger if MFC statements were supported by enforcement mechanisms, or 'if sanctions were involved' (P15). However, not all journalists agreed. One told us that the MFC 'will have a great impact... [because] it will irritate the President... Beyond that, it will make the government more cautious when attacking media because the eyes of the world are upon him' (P4).

Journalists in the Philippines also argued that, even if the MFC were to influence the government, media freedom was constrained by many other (f)actors, which required different forms of support to address. One interviewee told us that, 'it's not only Duterte's government that has caused the problems... It's the media moguls [and] some of their employment practices' (P31). Journalists highlighted the need for other initiatives to support 'citizen journalism projects' (P9), 'safety training' (P1), 'networking opportunities' (P17), 'legal support' (P2), 'financing of regional outlets' (P14) and 'educating the public' (P19). For this reason, the MFC was described as 'a baby step' (P17) and as contributing 'little by little' (P1) to supporting media freedom.

*4.3 Did the journalists share the MFC's understanding of media freedom?*

As discussed earlier, the MFC adopted a narrow, absolute, negative, and state-centric understanding of media freedom, in its first two years (see Scott et al., 2023). Our interviews show that this narrative contrasted starkly with the complex, dynamic, and contested understandings of media freedom held by journalists in Sudan and the Philippines.

In Sudan, nearly all journalists described media freedom as a relative freedom, believing that there were various legitimate limits to freedom of expression. As one journalist put it, '[my] freedom ends at the beginning of the other's freedom. You cannot abuse and harass others and think that this is a part of your freedom' (S5). The most often cited limits to media freedom related to defamation, 'harming national security' (S14), and 'being advocates for the previous regime' (S13). By contrast, in its public statements about Sudan and its wider work the MFC never acknowledged such potential limits or recognised that such limits may vary for different contexts (see Author(s), 2022a). The roadmap, for example, referred only to its ambition to 'align Sudan's media laws with international standards' (UNESCO, 2020, p. 1) and its only reference to defamation laws noted its 'misuse to suppress the reporting of news and opinion that is critical of the authorities' (ibid).

Journalists in Sudan described the main threats to media freedom as coming from the state, but also economic factors, the military and security services, and especially the recently established disempowerment committee. This independent committee was responsible for purging Sudan of the remnants of the ousted regime but was accused by multiple respondents of arbitrarily arresting journalists and closing news outlets linked with the old regime. By contrast, the MFC consistently emphasised that governments were by far the greatest threat to media freedom. In the roadmap, there was no mention of the disempowerment committee and only one reference to the military and security services.

Interviewees in Sudan adopted both negative and positive understandings of media freedom, calling for a combination of interventions that would both remove restrictions from journalists *and* build their capacity and professionalism. By contrast**,** the MFC's discourse focussed almost exclusively on negative freedom, and especially legal constraints and threats to journalists' safety. For example, the most widely publicised statement relating to Sudan's membership of the MFC was prime minister Hamdok's commitment at the UN General Assembly upon joining the MFC that, 'no journalists in the new Sudan will be subjected to repression or imprisonment' (IFEX, 2020).

In the Philippines, the MFC also adopted a narrow approach to media freedom, focusing on legal threats to individual journalists. This was exemplified by its strong emphasis on supporting the journalist, Maria Ressa. Diplomats from multiple MFC members repeatedly observed her trial proceedings and her case was explicitly raised in the MFC's joint statement. Ressa's legal team was also led by Amal Clooney, who was the UK's Special Envoy on Media Freedom and who had helped launch the MFC. According to several UK civil servants, Maria Ressa was 'a priority case' (P33) because 'she's very high profile' (P33) and her 'link to Amal Clooney puts her in the UK Foreign Secretary's mind' (P34). There was also a widespread perception amongst MFC member states that 'obviously the Maria Ressa case in particular kind of exemplifies all these... media freedom issues' (P40), as one diplomat put it. However, the journalists we interviewed did not agree. Instead, they highlighted a far wider range of threats to media freedom in the Philippines, including 'failing business models' (P5), 'corruption' (P7), 'pushback from the public' (P13), 'political disinformation' (P15), 'red-tagging' (P15), 'a dysfunctional justice system' (P19), 'threats to safety' (P13), 'abductions' (P11), 'intimidation' (P10), 'impunity for crimes against journalists' (P9), 'self-censorship' (P10), 'extra judicial killings' (P3), 'a divided media sector' (P19), 'ownership by big business' (P10), 'Duterte verbally attacking the media' (P3),

'poor internet connectivity' (P5) and 'sexual harassment' (P3). As one journalist put it, 'we have multiple layers of shit' (P18). Numerous interviewees also emphasised that the situation is 'very different [for journalists]… living in provinces... as opposed to those in Metro Manila' (P3) (see Author(s), 2022c). Thus, the MFC's understanding of media freedom was very different to that of our interviewees, in both countries.

*4.4 Did journalists support the MFC?*

Surprisingly, the journalists in our study still supported the MFC (once they learned of its work) – even though they did not necessarily agree with its narrative about media freedom, and/or think it was likely to have an impact. This support was particularly strong in the Philippines where almost all journalists were supportive of the MFC, in principle, describing it as 'very beneficial' (P20), 'well appreciated' (P14) and 'a much-welcome helping hand' (P2). Two reasons were consistently given for this. First, journalists appeared to be supportive of the principle of diplomatic and narrative intervention, which underpinned the MFC's approach. They understood the MFC's purpose as being to, 'reinforce the message that it is important to protect and promote press freedom' (P6) and to 'be seen by the Philippine government as being heavily involved' (P18) in doing so. As one journalist explained, 'our government will know that foreign institutions are watching over us, and have to deal with the press fairly, properly, because there's international pressure' (P19). Several journalists also felt that the alternative was much worse because if the MFC did not publicly condemn egregious violations of media freedom, this would further undermine the strength of media freedom as an international norm.

They also understood that while the MFC's statements were unlikely to have a direct and immediate impact on specific government actions, it could still, over time, contribute to wider change in state behaviour. Journalists told us it could encourage the government to

‘start getting nervous’ (P7), ‘think twice’ (P16), ‘hold back’ (P7) or become ‘more cautious... when attacking media’ (P4). One diplomat we interviewed also explained that ‘it's not going to be a quick overnight win but if it can plant a few seeds and show people there is another way, maybe in a few years’ time, you might see that change’ (P32). For some, this supportive perspective was informed by previous experiences, most notably a belief that international pressure had, over time, contributed to investigations into the 2009 Ampatuan massacre in the Philippines, in which at least 34 journalists are known to have been killed. In addition, many journalists felt that by ‘supporting the narrative of media freedom’ (P41) the MFC could have wider effects on public discourse about the media, which could contribute to increasing crowdfunding and building trust with sources, for example.

Second, journalists in the Philippines who were aware of the MFC regarded its ‘messages of support’ (P7) as an important ‘morale booster’ (P14), describing its public statements and limited consultation activities as helping them feel ‘hope’ (P11), ‘solidarity’ (P16) and ‘encouragement’ (P14). As one journalist explained, ‘moral support is always welcome because at least we know we’re not alone in this fight. It fuels our advocacy’ (P8). Another said that ‘the hardest thing for any embattled sector is to feel that you are alone especially if you are up against the powers that be’ (P13). Such feelings of support were felt especially keenly within newsrooms that had been named publicly in statements of support, published by the MFC. One such journalist told us, ‘it's like the Coalition is holding the sky, so that it will not fall onto us’ (P11).

Journalists in the Philippines were particularly supportive of the international dimension of the MFC. We were repeatedly told that President Duterte’s threatening and abusive language towards the media had helped create a ‘climate of fear’ (P17) amongst journalists in the Philippines, which meant that, ‘not too many organizations are willing to stand up for media freedom at this time’ (P4). This reluctance for ‘[news] organizations to

speak out publicly' (P13) was compounded by what multiple journalists described as the 'Philippine media's highly competitive nature' (P13). Indeed, one journalist told us that they would be 'reprimanded… [by their owners] if they see that you vocally support another [news outlet]' (P13). Given this 'fear of backlash' (P7) within the Philippines, interviewees described it as 'really very helpful to get supporters from the international community' (P7) because they can 'bridge those visible and invisible barriers' (P18). Several journalists also emphasised the importance of governments providing support, arguing that, 'if you feel the presence of other people multilaterally - not just INGOs - but if governments are right there, throwing their hats in the ring, then that's a big deal' (P1).

In Sudan, once they had been made aware of the MFC's work, approximately two thirds of the journalists we interviewed were supportive of it in principle, describing it as potentially 'useful' (S9), 'a great support' (S6) and 'very important' (S7). These journalists understood the MFC to operate by, 'putting pressure on the government to commit to what they have signed with regards to media freedom... [by showing that] the whole world was watching what was happening in Sudan' (S10). This approach was seen to be particularly appropriate at the time because prime minister Hamdok and the Sudanese government in general, were understood to be very keen to 'impress the international community' (S16). As one civil society representative told us,

> I think the transitional government cares very much about what the international community think of them, so if they keep subtly or softly demanding media reform, the government will have to give in at some point and start a serious process of reform (S21).

The Sudanese journalists we spoke to also regarded their government's desire to 'impress the international community' (S16) as linked to its ambition to establish its democratic legitimacy. For example, one journalist described meeting the international community's democratic standards as, 'one of the main conditions to lift the name of Sudan from the list of countries that sponsor terrorism' (S6).

Given this general support for the MFC and for its underpinning theory of narrative-led change, many respondents did not voice objections to the relatively low levels of consultation, discussed earlier, and/or chose not to engage with the initiative – because they did not regard their involvement as necessary for its success, especially because they were very busy. As one journalist said, 'I heard about the campaign, but I did not follow the details of what happened' (S14).

However, unlike in the Philippines, support for the MFC was not universal. Five of 17 journalists we interviewed (29 percent) had concerns. Three were critical of the MFC for emphasising international norms without any enforcement mechanisms, describing Sudan's MFC membership as 'just ink on paper' (S3) and as being 'for appearances only' (S12). Another objected, in principle, to the MFC working through government channels, rather than engaging with the journalists themselves directly. A fifth journalist told us that, 'we don't want to see some kind of colonialist approach where we see a new INGO just talking about what people on the ground know much better than they do' (S11).

**5.0 The MFC: Empty rhetoric, or strategic narrative?**

In 2021, the MFC claimed to be 'working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists, and hold[ing] to account those who harm journalists for doing their job' (MFC, 2021). Yet most of the journalists we spoke to in two countries prioritised by the MFC had never heard of it, and felt it had little chance of success. Indeed, during its first two years,

the MFC's existence could only really be discerned through its self-produced narratives in its international conferences, events, statements, meetings, and social media posts. These narratives were also very self-referential. Member states posted on social media about statements they had made, relating to issues they had discussed, in meetings with other member states.

In previous research, we have shown that the MFC's actions also generated very little media coverage (aside from its opening conference), and it allocated relatively little financial resources to support media freedom directly (Author(s), 2022a). Given this, it appears that, during its first two years at least, the MFC existed primarily in the minds and signs produced by actors in Western capitals, rather than in the lived experiences of those it was designed to benefit in Sudan, the Philippines and elsewhere. Several journalists in Sudan also reached this conclusion, describing the MFC as 'just ink on paper' (S3).

Furthermore, in Sudan, numerous journalists pointed out that the celebrated claim made by prime minister Hamdok upon joining the MFC that, in future, no journalists would be repressed or jailed – was demonstrably false, even during his own transitional government. In the Philippines, while the UK government claimed that 'the British Embassy in Manila is leading the way in promoting media freedom in the country' (FCO, 2019, para. 25) our analysis shows that, at best, its actions made a marginal contribution to supporting other much larger and well-coordinated efforts at the time (Author(s), 2022b). These findings appear to mirror previous studies, which conclude that international media freedom campaigns are generally ineffective because they do not directly lead to concrete improvements for journalists (Relly & González de Bustamante, 2017).

However, this is not the whole story. Despite a general lack of awareness and engagement with the MFC and scepticism about its likely impacts in the short-term, the journalists we interviewed, in both countries, were supportive of the MFC. This was

primarily because they valued what they understood as its efforts to raise the salience of media freedom internationally, in a way that their governments were more likely to respond to (albeit over the longer term), compared to pressure from domestic actors. In other words, they supported the MFC because it offered valuable strategic narratives about their work, even if they didn't use this exact term. This explains why most interviewees did not object to the MFC's relatively low levels of consultation: because they did not regard their involvement as necessary for its success. Similarly, they did not object to the MFC adopting a very different view of media freedom to their own because they understood that its absolute, negative, and state-centric narrative about media freedom was likely to be more effective in influencing their government.

The journalists we interviewed were also supportive of the MFC because it offered what they described as an important 'morale boost'. This appeared to stem from the MFC's validation of the very idea of media freedom, or it's 'willing[ness] to stand up for media freedom… [when] not too many organizations [were]' (P4), as one journalist put it. Put another way, the MFC's narratives appeared to provide 'novel elements' which were strategically useful for journalists because they offered a 'plot' in which their work was both at the heart of their national story and worthy of multi-lateral support (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5).

We do not know yet whether the MFC's strategic narratives will prove 'ontologically productive' – that is, whether their novel elements will 'alter dominant worldviews in ways that can potentially endure beyond the circumstances of their utterance' (Lerner & O'Loughlin, 2023, p. 5). But our research does show that, since power operates via narratives and ontological debates, international advocacy campaigns that are more style than substance should not necessarily be dismissed as 'empty rhetoric'. Furthermore, the testimonies of our interviewees suggest that practical interventions designed to directly assist journalists are not

inherently more valuable than narrative interventions, as is often assumed by international civil society actors.

Our findings also indicate that strategic narratives do not necessarily require 'translating' or acceptance by domestic civil society actors to function, as is often assumed in International Relations (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). This is an important addition to the current literature on strategic narratives, which has only rarely examined how audiences become entangled in narratives they don't necessarily agree with - in the context of a wider, complex ecosystem involving the government, military, civil society and other actors.

However, these conclusions raise three key challenges. First, if international advocacy campaigns can legitimately claim to have impact via their strategic narratives whilst hardly existing on the ground, with relatively low levels of in-country engagement, and with disconnected understandings of media freedom – then it becomes almost impossible to hold them accountable to their commitments. For example, the MFC's lack of direct engagement with Sudanese journalists made it very difficult for them to pressure the MFC to take stronger action after Sudan's transitional government was replaced by the military in a coup in October 2021. It took 22 months from the military coup - and 4 months from the start of the civil war in April 2023 - for Sudan to be expelled from the MFC. It is also extremely difficult to evaluate campaigns that overstates the significance of their work if such claims are themselves part of achieving impact and changing narratives. In which case, perhaps future evaluations of such initiatives should focus not just on establishing whether they are directly triggering immediate and concrete improvements on the ground, but also on questioning how their strategic narratives are formulated, who they benefit, and who they might inadvertently harm.

Second, narrative interventions from international campaigns may be more likely to have adverse unintended consequences if they are disconnected from the communities they

aim to support. For example, by celebrating individual 'heroes' or figureheads of media freedom, who might not necessarily represent local realities, strategic narratives may inadvertently promote divisiveness within the wider media industry or lead to these actors being stigmatised domestically (Author(s), 2022b; Author(s), 2022(c)). Similarly, in Sudan, several of our interviewees, who predicted the 2021 military coup, argued that the transitional government at the time hesitated to advance substantive media reforms, in the hope of maintaining the fragile partnership they had established with the military. It is vital that international advocacy campaigns take such insights into account to prevent strategic narratives inadvertently doing more harm than good.

Finally, while the journalists we interviewed may have broadly welcomed the MFC's approach, Mitchell's (2025) recent work reminds us that the usefulness of international strategies to support journalists is heavily dependent on contextual factors including government type, time period and levels of violence and impunity. Indeed, since Marcos Jr became President of the Philippines in June 2022, the international community's support for media freedom, and for human rights in general, has shifted away from a more confrontational naming-and-shaming approach, towards more collaborative, technical-assistance style initiatives. This appears to reflect changing geopolitical imperatives whereby both the new Philippines government and donor governments benefit from the strategic narratives provided by a softer approach. Given this, it is a welcome development that, since 2021, the MFC's approach has evolved to include a much greater focus on actions taken by MFC member embassies, which can be more tailored to individual country contexts.

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