Quality of journalism under attack

Quality of journalism under attack, says IFJ President

Journalism has never before faced â€˜a crisis of such dimensionsâ€™ was the arresting message given to journalists gathered in Brussels to support the â€˜Stand Up for journalismâ€™ day of action on 5 November.

Speaking at a debate held in the Residence Palace, Brussels, Aidan White, president of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) went on to list abuses against journalists perpetrated by governments in the name of security - such as phone-tapping and spies in the newsroom. He also decried cuts in editorial departments and slashed investment in training. "Unable to cope with the pressures of change, the media are resorting to panic-stricken measures in a time of declining audiences," he said. White called for "a new dialogue with the authorities about the future of journalism".
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The keynote speaker, Thomas Hammarberg, is a former journalist, former general secretary of Amnesty International and current Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe. He stressed the inherent link between rights of free speech of journalists and the principle of human rights. He noted the Council of Europeâ€™s grave concern over imprisonment of journalists on spurious charges, invented by governments seeking to silence dissident voices. The Court of Human Rights, said Hammarberg, had recently confirmed that the right of free speech includes statements which â€˜offend, shock or disturb.â€™ This clearly gives journalists the right to speak out vociferously against governments. Emerging democracies, continued Hammarberg, look to western Europe as a guide and it is essential, in his view, that defamation ceases to be a criminal offence. Mr Hammarberg commended the Campaign for Ethical Journalism launched by the IFJ in May 2007.

For Lorenzo Consoli, head of the Association de la Presse Internationale (API), the priority was to â€˜reaffirm the role of journalists as watchdogs of democracyâ€™ in the face of pressure to merely â€˜rubber-stampâ€™ press communiquÃ©s. He cr the growing power of lobbyists in Brussels and of national governments pushing their own line.Â "If we are not vigilant,â€• he said, â€œwe will give credibility to the spin of people trying to manipulate information". It was central to journalistsâ€™ function, continued Consoli, to denounce the Commission when it failed in its role as mediator of the common European interest.
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Leigh Phillips of the NUJ highlighted the decline in available jobs due to cutbacks and the closure of European offices by major newspapers. He signalled the dangers in Brussels of too much influence from business and lobbying interests, pointing to the fact that â€˜sources of news and advertisements can sometimes be the same organisationâ€™. Independence is thus under threat, with media forced to rely on Commission funded projects or sponsorship from industry.
Declining working conditions further threatened independence, continued Phillips. Some journalists are pushed to providing copy for free and the use of badly paid interns is on the increase. Young journalists, anxious to secure a foothold in the profession, are being exploited by employers who offer poorly paid short-term contracts only. To add to the problem, many available jobs are in truth â€˜false independentâ€™ posts â€“ journalists are forced to work full-time for one client, but on an independent basis, thus deprived of employment rights and securities.
Phillips called on journalists to join together, join a union and act in concert. It was imperative, he said, that journalists agitate for a functioning â€˜wallâ€™ between editorial and commercial departments in their media and he backed a suggestion form the floor that media in Brussels be encouraged to openly support this.

There followed a lively debate, with journalists from the audience joining speakers to condemn untoward influence by lobbyists and to reinforce the need for joint union pressure. Concerns were expressed that technological and societal changes were harming the quality of journalism with over-emphasis on immediate reporting and the growth of blogging. While the internet undoubtedly offered great opportunities for fast, widespread communication, it also presented dangers through the recycling of unchecked information and the lack of editorial oversight.