

**Laudatio Reporters Without Borders**

Last year, worldwide, forty-five journalists were killed. Fifty-four were held hostage. Eighty-four journalists went missing. Five hundred twenty-one journalists were detained. Behind these numbers are individuals who risked *everything* to uncover inconvenient truths, ask uncomfortable questions, denounce abuses, and alert the public. They risked their work, homes, and lives. For almost forty years now, Reporters Without Borders gives a name, a face, and a voice to each and every one of these silenced individuals.

Reporters Without Borders was born out of an unwavering dedication of four French journalists to press freedom. And out of their steadfast conviction that access to unbiased, free, and reliable information is a *fundamental* human right. *Essential* to understand, form an opinion, and take action on issues that affect our lives and societies.

Since its beginnings, Reporters Without Borders has been working tirelessly to protect journalists, combat censorship, and promote transparency in societies where public debate is eroded through misinformation and false truths. Its efforts extend from the buzzing hallways of the United Nations to the rough valleys of Afghanistan. Every day, the dedicated professionals behind Reporters Without Borders monitor attacks on freedom of information worldwide – and loudly denounce media blackouts and government crackdowns. They pressure authorities and officials to scrap any laws designed to limit access to information. They financially assist persecuted journalists and their families. They offer safety training to war correspondents. They investigate cases of imprisoned and murdered journalists. They conduct on-site visits to gain more insights into working conditions. Throughout these activities, the Reporters Without Borders advocates constantly need to distinguish the acute from the chronic, and the urgent from the important.

Over the years, the mobilising force unleashed by Reporters Without Borders has led to many great successes. Journalists have been released. Assistance has been provided to more than a thousand reporters in the field over the past five years alone. And advances in international law have been made. A notable milestone in this last respect is the *‘International Partnership for Information and Democracy’* – aimed at guaranteeing reliable information, freedom of opinion, and freedom of expression for citizens everywhere. The Partnership has more than fifty signatories, including Belgium.

Dear guests, dear colleagues:

Freedom of information, freedom of expression, and press freedom are touchstones of any democracy. Without these freedoms, democratic institutions can easily be undermined – or worse: dismantled. Luckily, we live in a country where journalists generally enjoy a high degree of trust. Where media outlets are free. A country where there are legal frameworks in place, with solid constitutional guarantees. *However*. As the ‘*World Press Freedom Index’* developed by Reporters Without Borders shows: journalists in Belgium, too, sometimes face intimidation and even violence during demonstrations. They receive threats. And, sometimes, they feel or *are* pressured *not* to report a story.

In the latest ‘*World Press Freedom Index’*, Belgium ranks sixteenth. France twenty-first. Germany tenth. The Netherlands fourth. But that’s beside the point. The ‘*World Press Freedom Index’* is a prime example of how Reporters Without Borders leverages technology and innovation to pursue their mission – and to fully grasp threats to press freedom in democracies and dictatorships (and everything in between). The analysis provided by Reporters Without Borders is a strong reminder that even in established democracies, press freedom can *never* be taken for granted. Free access to reliable information is *not* a given. We’ve seen this. During the COVID-nineteen pandemic, we’ve seen waves of misinformation flooding societies in Europe. We’ve seen some fierce criticism toward media outlets, accused of covering the health crisis from a largely pro-government perspective.

The ‘*World Press Freedom Index’* is like a sounding alarm – and we should listen carefully and act accordingly. In established democracies like ours, press freedom will *not* disappear in the blink of an eye. But when democratically elected governments start to wield financial power or use regulatory pressure, when half-truths and outright lies are spread by those expected to uphold our constitution, when the credibility of independent and mainstream media is verbally attacked, then our quiet voices should become a loud chorus. This is at the core of what Reporters Without Borders is teaching us through its work.

Dear Mister Bruttin,

In an era where the free press is increasingly under pressure, in a world where misinformation spreads like wildfire, Reporters Without Borders reminds us of the critical role that a free and independent press plays in safeguarding our democratic society. Reporters Without Borders stands as a fearless advocate for those who risk their lives to report stories that need to be reported, address problems that need to be addressed, defend rights that need to be defended, preserve ideas that need to be preserved.

With this Foundation Day Honorary Award, Hasselt University acknowledges the unparalleled commitment of Reporters Without Borders to defending press freedom and freedom of information, and the commitment to promoting fundamental principles of democracy.

On behalf of our community of Professors, staff, and students: congratulations!

– *prof. dr. Bernard Vanheusden, rector UHasselt*