

PRESS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

As election unfolds, two to one concur – Unregulated Political Comment Online Helps the Democratic Process

London, UK – 9 April 2010. Online journalism and political blogging will be good for the fair conduct of the UK general election and for the democratic process as a whole, a group of senior media practitioners, bloggers and press freedom experts declared at the annual UK World Press Freedom Day debate. Following a spirited exchange it was agreed in a vote of more than two to one that, “Unregulated political comment online helps the democratic process”, (40 for the motion, 15 against, 1 abstaining).

On 9th April, at the annual debate, Sir Robert Worcester (MORI/Ipsos Group; University of Kent), Sunny Hundal (founder of the Liberal Conspiracy blog), Caroline Thomson (Chief Operating Officer, BBC), Professor Steven Barnett (University of Westminster), Paul Bradshaw (Birmingham City University) and Nicholas Jones (Author, ex-BBC) debated the future of democracy and journalism in the digital age. The torrent of arguments was skilfully moderated by the Chair, William Horsley (Chair of the Association of European Journalists, UK).

Founder of MORI polling Sir Robert Worcester joined forces with Liberal Conspiracy blog founder Sunny Hundal to argue that while the internet will carry more openly biased comment and more character attacks than ever before, this should not tempt towards regulation of the online space.

Sir Robert opened the debate saying that the US-style First Amendment right to free speech should never be sacrificed in the face of regulation, and that the variety of arguments provided by the “speaker’s corner” of the internet benefited the democratic process. Hundal stressed that formal regulation is not required in the blogosphere as successful sites are those that practice self-regulation, and ultimately deliver accurate stories and reporting.

Sir Robert and Hundal was challenged by Caroline Thomson of the BBC and Professor Steven Barnett of the University of Westminster, who claimed that unregulated content alone can devolve into unstructured partisan opinion, leaving voters without an impartial voice to turn to. Blogging is often a distorting and trivialising force which merely provides an echo chamber for existing voices. The online space was moreover exclusionary to a large proportion of the population who were still not online.

It is therefore key to democracy and the democratic process that the unregulated space is accompanied by trusted factual content – so regulated, impartial, accurate content and rigorous analysis sits alongside comment, both informed and uninformed.

Also hotly debated was the arrival of online TV and radio channels which run to heavy political agendas without any regulation or legal requirements of fairness or balance. The ability of these online sites to influence the news agendas of the major broadcasters was seen as a trend which requires increased attention.

At the opening of the debate, Hannah Marshall was announced as the winner of the 2010 World Press Freedom Day Student Journalism Competition. Hannah, an MA student studying Media at Southampton Solent University, was honoured for her article on how new media can positively effect the UK election and the democratic process as a whole.

The 2010 World Press Freedom Day London debate was organised by the UK National Commission for UNESCO and the Press Freedom Network, with the support of the Frontline Club and the BBC College of Journalism.

ENDS

For further information, or to arrange an interview, please contact Ian White at the UK National Commission for UNESCO on +44 (0) 20 77 66 34 92 or iwhite@unesco.org.uk.

Notes to Editors

- ***The UK National Commission for UNESCO*** is the focal point in the UK for UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)-related policies and activities. As an independent body, the UK National Commission brings together a network of nearly 250 experts from across the UK in the fields of education, culture, sciences and communication. Working closely in partnership with HM Government and UK civil society, the UK National Commission aims to provide expert advice to the Government on UNESCO related matters, develop UK input into UNESCO policy-making, promote reforms within UNESCO, and encourage support in the UK for UNESCO's ideals and work.
- ***The Press Freedom Network*** is a loose grouping of organisations, publications and individuals who are sympathetic to or directly interested in the cause of media freedom. It contributes to the organisation of the annual World Press Freedom Day event (usually a debate) on May 3, in addition to discussing other topical and relevant issues. The network operates mainly via an effective e-group but with occasional meetings (in London); and acts primarily as an information and debating forum rather than seeking to make policy decisions binding to any member.
- ***World Press Freedom Day (3 May)*** is a day to celebrate the fundamental principles of press freedom; to evaluate press freedom around the world, to defend the media from attacks on their independence and to pay tribute to journalists who have lost their lives in the exercise of their profession. 3 May was proclaimed World Press Freedom Day by the UN General Assembly in 1993 following a Recommendation adopted at the twenty-sixth session of UNESCO's General Conference in 1991. It serves as an occasion to inform citizens of violations of press freedom - a reminder that in dozens of countries around the world, publications are censored, fined, suspended and closed down, while journalists, editors and publishers are harassed, attacked, detained and even murdered.