



Reset required?

Evaluating the Media Freedom Coalition after its first two years

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Summary: We have conducted an independent evaluation of the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) after its first two years of operation (2019-2021). The MFC is a partnership of 50 countries working together to advocate for media freedom and the safety of journalists. This report is based on over 100 interviews with relevant stakeholders; analyses of news coverage, social media commentary and public statements; and a survey of media freedom campaigners – as well as detailed case studies in Sudan and the Philippines.

We ask one central question: **is the Media Freedom Coalition working?**

We have assessed the Coalition by its own pledges: 1) to promote accountability by ‘raising the cost’ to those who abuse or violate media freedom; 2) to hold its own members to account over media freedom violations; 3) to work together as a coalition, expand the membership and collaborate with partners (including the Consultative Network, UNESCO and the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom; 4) to ‘shine a spotlight’ on the issue of media freedom by raising awareness of it; and 5) to develop and defend the media by providing practical support to independent media around the world. A summary of our findings are provided in the scorecard overleaf.

Recommendations: To strengthen the work of the MFC moving forward, we propose the following:

1. The MFC should formally agree and implement a clear and transparent process for determining which ‘situations of concern’ it chooses to highlight in its joint statements.
2. The MFC should provide a substantive response to each of the advisory reports published by the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom, detailing how and when MFC members intend to implement their recommendations.
3. The minimum requirement for retaining membership of the MFC should be strengthened to include, for example: adopting a National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, contributing to the UNESCO Global Media Defence Fund, adopting a certain number of recommendations from the High Level Panel, and signing a significant proportion of the MFC’s joint statements. Members that do not respect the principles contained in the Global Pledge should be monitored closely leading to swift suspension or expulsion.
4. The MFC should implement a communications strategy which improves its online presence and pro-actively raises the profile of the Coalition and its work (especially its joint statements and the work of the High Level Panel), and facilitate more frequent communications with the Consultative Network and other relevant stakeholders.
5. The MFC’s current ‘diplomacy-heavy, grant-light’ approach should be re-set to include a much stronger emphasis on providing financial support for media sustainability.
6. The MFC should clarify the theory of change underpinning its activities and institute a system of monitoring, evaluation and learning to improve the coherence and effectiveness of its work. In particular, the MFC must ensure that its actions are informed by an understanding of the complex, dynamic and diverse priorities of the journalists and media workers around the world.

Media Freedom Coalition Scorecard

We have assessed and awarded a mark for each of the MFC's five main pledges and given an overall score of **AMBER/RED**.

The MFC has itself recognised many of the issues outlined below and is working to address them. It has a secretariat, Executive Committee members and online presence. Given this, the growing international profile of media freedom more generally, and the apparent easing of restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic – there is reason to believe that the MFC will be able to achieve the re-set we believe is required for it to achieve its original aims.

Scorecard for the MFC's five main objectives:



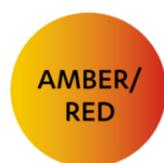
1. Promoting accountability: This objective is only partially met because the Media Freedom Coalition has not been bold or public enough with its joint statements about countries violating media freedom. However, there have been some successful examples of private diplomacy.



2. Creating internal accountability: Achievements in this area have been poor because members within the Coalition have not been publicly held to account or excluded by their peers when they have violated media freedoms. Core members of the Coalition are not leading sufficiently by example, by adopting recommendations for change 'at home'.



3. Working together: Despite the enormous challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, the MFC has successfully worked together, shared information and convened a relatively large group of like-minded states. Membership of the Coalition has prompted positive change by a handful of states. However, collaboration with the Consultative Network and the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom could still be improved.



4. 'Shining a spotlight' on media freedom: The Coalition has failed to generate any significant press coverage of its activities, except around its initial conference in 2019. It has been largely invisible due to a weak online presence and lack of a communications strategy, for the first two years of operations. As a result, its activities – indeed the very existence of the MFC – have been practically hidden from general view.



5. Developing and defending the media: The funds allocated to support media freedom under the MFC have been small. In the Philippines and Sudan (our case-studied countries), funded projects were relevant and well executed. However, they were an adjunct to diplomatic efforts and had little impact on levels of media freedom in these two countries.

Green = Strong achievement across the board

Green/Amber = Satisfactory achievement in most areas but partial achievement in others

Amber/Red = Unsatisfactory achievement in most areas with some positive elements

Red = Poor achievement across most areas with urgent remedial action required in some