

Learning paper on maximising the impact of joint government statements

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The Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) is a cross-regional partnership of countries working together to advocate for media freedom at home and abroad. The MFC was established in July 2019 at the Global Conference for Media Freedom and now comprises over 50 member states from six continents. The MFC works collaboratively with legal experts (through the High Level Panel of Legal Experts on Media Freedom), civil society (through the MFC's Consultative Network), UNESCO, and many others to promote media freedom and the safety of journalists. It does this through a combination of advocacy, interventions in media freedom cases, actions through embassies, facilitating legal reforms, events and convenings, and supporting UNESCO's Global Media Defence Fund.



The Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) is an intergovernmental coalition established in 2011 in The Hague, based on the principle that human rights people have offline must also be protected online, and committed to advancing Internet freedom worldwide. Today, the Coalition counts 40 Members spanning from Africa to Asia, Europe, the Americas, and the Middle East. The FOC works together, including through multistakeholder engagement with its independent Advisory Network (FOC-AN) and others who share these views, to ensure challenges and opportunities relating to Internet freedom and digital technologies are on the policy agenda as a way to drive concrete policy changes and outcomes, and shape global norms to promote a rules-based, democratic, and inclusive world where human rights and fundamental freedoms are upheld in digital contexts.

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Recommendations in brief:

- Consider whether a joint statement is the best approach in any given situation
- Better define and articulate the purpose and objectives behind joint statements
- Ensure better communication between stakeholders at all stages of the process for developing and publishing statements
- Bring member states and other relevant stakeholders together to establish a deeper understanding of the processes that governments and civil society go through in connection with joint statements
- Improve outreach and dissemination around joint statements
- Ensure the content of statements is as strong as possible, for example through rooting them in human rights principles, deploying facts and figures, and including calls-to-action
- Maximise the timeliness of statements

Introduction

One of the ways in which governments advocate on important human rights issues is through joint statements. In a joint statement, a group of governments will develop, agree and then publish a text on a specific issue. Such statements are used regularly by governments to advocate on human rights issues including media freedom and digital rights. Some joint statements are thematic in nature, expressing a position on one or more human rights issues, while others may comment on developments in specific countries or on the persecution of specific individuals.

Both the Media Freedom Coalition (MFC) and the Freedom Online Coalition (FOC) regularly produce joint statements. Most – though not all – of the MFC’s statements to date have focussed on specific cases of media freedom violation, while the FOC’s statements have mostly been thematic, focussing on issues such as information integrity or internet shutdowns. In both coalitions the member states draft and sign the statements, while other stakeholders provide advice and consultation on which cases to put forward and the content of the statements. This advice comes particularly from civil society, academia, and private sector stakeholders, through the MFC’s Consultative Network¹ (CN) and FOC’s Advisory Network² (AN). The MFC’s past joint statements can be found [here](#), while the FOC’s statements can be viewed [here](#).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how the MFC and FOC, as well as other initiatives that produce joint statements on human rights issues, can maximise the impact of these statements. The paper employed (1) desk research focussing on available information and documents from the MFC and FOC as well as academic literature on public diplomacy, and (2) qualitative research consisting of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from the government, civil society, and media/journalism sectors who had connections to, or had been affected by, work related to the MFC and FOC.

Key stakeholders were identified in advance in collaboration with the MFC and FOC, taking into consideration geographical diversity and capacity levels. In total the following groups were interviewed: 6 member states, 4 INGOs, 6 Global South-based CSOs and NGOs, 2 journalists and 2 academics.

¹ The Consultative Network of the Media Freedom Coalition, created in January 2020, is a group of national, regional and international organisations that in collaboration with a much broader set of civil society groups, voluntarily provides advice to the MFC on the Coalition’s work and facilitates selection of cases that it believes require State intervention. Read more [here](#).

² The FOC-AN is an independent multistakeholder group composed of civil society, academia, technical community and private sector representatives who provide advice on aims, objectives and activities, as well as support the FOC’s mission of advancing Internet freedom and human rights online through its working methods. Read more [here](#).

Key findings

Overall, this paper finds that joint government statements can be an effective way of raising awareness of human rights issues and violations, establishing international norms, providing solidarity with those affected by violations, and demonstrating that the international community is monitoring the issue. In some circumstances they might help prevent a worsening of the human rights situation. The desk research and interviews gave rise to a number of learning points that will be of interest to stakeholders within the MFC and FOC, and potentially to wider audiences.

The importance of solidarity through statements cannot be underestimated

For journalists and human rights defenders (HRDs) who might benefit from a change in behaviour as a result of diplomatic instruments such as statements, the show of solidarity that comes with joint government statements cannot be underestimated. Solidarity comes in different forms. Statements can act as a motivational tool for those who remain incarcerated or worse. They also demonstrate that accountable, strong media will continue to fight corruption and human rights violations despite clampdowns and restrictions on media and digital freedom. Journalists and HRDs see joint statements on government-sponsored actions that violate human rights and fundamental freedoms as a key tool which puts pressure on state authorities because their peers, i.e. other states, are being critical of their actions. Like the national CSOs, journalists felt that such statements could prevent an escalation in an already challenging situation.

In some situations [CSOs] have made it clear that they wanted as many voices in the international community expressing solidarity with them and their work as possible because the government has made such an intensive effort to discredit them and to label them, to criminalize them, as extremists. In situations like that, I think that kind of solidarity from the global community is quite important.

Civil society stakeholder

National civil society organisations were more likely to view statements as effective compared to INGOs

When it comes to perceptions on the role that statements should play in diplomatic processes, there is a distinction between international organisations and national CSOs. National CSOs active in the MFC's Consultative Network (CN) and the FOC's Advisory Network (AN) viewed statements as an important expression of solidarity by the international community, as well as a means of political advocacy even without clear calls to action.

National CSOs largely felt that statements "added pressure" to private diplomacy tools, particularly as the collective voice enabled by the coalitions removed the sensitivity of finger pointing that might be felt when one country targets another. For national CSOs, the diplomatic presence of some member states in the countries in which they are active also made statements more effective.

National CSOs also noted that case-specific statements were more likely to have longer term implications as many countries were still dependent on foreign aid and, as one noted, "it really does matter how these issues are being raised internationally." Another national CSO

commented, “It doesn’t need to be attacking. It’s meant to trigger a positive reaction to a situation or case regarding press freedom or media safety.”

By contrast, representatives of some international organisations were less optimistic that statements were effective as a diplomatic tool and were more likely to highlight specific statements which they felt had been ineffective. For example, some stakeholders referenced the MFC’s 2022 statement on the killing of Shireen Abu Akleh³, which received predominantly negative feedback with reference to the time taken to prepare and publish the statement as well as its content.

Statement objectives could be clearer and better aligned across stakeholder groups

Some viewed statements as an important public diplomacy tool and effective in norm-setting around issues related to media and digital freedoms; others saw statements as an effective way to raise awareness of violations by states, provide solidarity to those affected, and demonstrate that the international community is monitoring such violations. However, there were also some who, in the case where statements lack clear action plans or follow up, viewed statements as performative at best. This demonstrates a clear need to develop stronger indicators, based on context, to measure the effectiveness of statements.

Of course, with this statement, you cannot end Internet shutdowns in Iran. Several people approached me to say ‘What is the purpose of this statement then if you cannot end [internet shutdowns]. I think that this is misplacing the purpose of this statement. I think the purpose of this statement was to reach out to the outside world, showing that the Freedom Online Coalition and therefore all these governments have solidarity with this protest. What’s more is that they speak about the open, interoperable, stable Internet. Internet as a basic right, you know, for exercising of political rights. I think the impact of this statement was raising awareness.

Academic

CSO stakeholders in particular emphasised that the goals behind case-specific statements needed to be more aligned across the stakeholder groups in order to ensure that they might be more effective. Being clear that statements might not lead to higher-order results but still have a purpose was seen as an important element to assessing the effectiveness of statements. It was also suggested that providing greater clarity on why statements are important at that particular time would lead to more engagement and buy-in from civil society within the MFC and FOC: “If we don’t know why there is a statement being made, then we don’t think that actually a statement would be particularly helpful.”

Statements are useful for internal advocacy within governments

Member states who were interviewed for this report all commented that the process by which statements are circulated to different departments in their government for approval in itself raises awareness of the topics and policy areas at hand, including media freedom and human rights, regardless of whether a statement is actually then signed or published.

³ <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/statements/2022/media-freedom-coalition-statement-on-the-killing-of-shireen-abu-akleh/>

The process of developing joint statements actually really helps a lot of us who work in the human rights space to be able to convey a message within our own foreign ministry systems – so having a statement really allows us to advocate for that position.

Government stakeholder

Statements could include more recommendations or “calls to action”

Civil society stakeholders were keen to see more calls to action (CTAs) and recommendations in statements. This could take the form of being more specific about what is being asked, what should be improved, or what needs to be dealt with, again focusing on using positive language where possible. Usage of words such as “concerned” or “condemn” in a statement felt less effective to stakeholders than a clear outline of possible actions.

It is no good having strong language and no action. We need a proper call for action and a clear set of next steps following off the statements.

Civil society stakeholder

It should be noted that member states were less likely to see a need for CTAs or recommendations in statements. For them, statements which demonstrate an awareness and raise the profile of media and Internet freedom, by condemning or calling out a situation, can allow them to stay in line with their own foreign policy approach, which might for example prevent them from calling for change.

Statements are more effective when linked to human rights standards

Rooting statements in human rights principles and standards, providing definitions, or referencing international frameworks and regulatory mechanisms were all seen as key elements to effective statements. Including such content meant statements could play a role in preserving norms and raising the profile of an issue. It was also seen to be less accusatory, which was one aspect of language that stakeholders agreed needed to be addressed in future statements.

Getting the language right can open doors to further dialogue

Some stakeholders argued for more strategic language in statements, as “pushing too hard could tip things in the opposite direction.” Rather than using what might be seen to be aggressive language, stressing a sense of urgency or alarm about a situation was proposed to be more effective, particularly in case-specific statements. Taking time to ensure that language was precise and specific and reflected the context was also seen to be critical.

One government stakeholder commented that choice of language could be more influential than the theme of a statement because getting language right could open up the door for more sensitive topics being addressed. Presenting the issue using fact-based evidence was also suggested in order to overcome political sensitivities, although clearly this does not always work as it is not always possible to avoid such sensitivities in certain contexts.

Statements should be backed up by other diplomatic actions

Those who were more positive about the use of statements commented that they should also be backed up by other diplomatic actions, including private diplomacy (which itself can take many forms).

Civil society lacks tools we need in our advocacy, and with statements we are asking governments to take a stand so I think these kinds of statements can be quite important ... but they do need to be backed by action.

Civil society stakeholder

Statements become more effective when they are cited

International organisations felt that statements became effective when international organisations or even governments were referencing them at other multilateral forums or in their public communications. To that regard, norm-setting statements where definitions and principles are laid out - as in, for example, the MFC's statement on transnational repression⁴, or the FOC's statement on artificial intelligence⁵ – become more effective the more they are cited and used.

Statements can also introduce definitions for emerging phenomena. An example is the MFC's transnational repression statement, which was viewed as effective by the majority of stakeholders and as a tool for advocacy and accountability for some time after the statement came out. One international organisation noted that they continued to use the statement "when states who signed onto that statement are doing things around the [UN] Cybercrime Treaty that would go against the principles laid out in that statement." In this regard, it is worth considering that some statements might become more effective after they are issued. In this case, the introduction of the phrase "transnational repression" and the accompanying description was viewed as an important contributing factor to the statement's effectiveness.

When it comes to statements, less is more

It was generally agreed by most stakeholders that less is more when it comes to the number of statements issued by the coalitions. It was felt that more time should be spent on ensuring language, content, timing and signatories can make statements more effective rather than just issuing as many statements as possible. Furthermore, additional time could be spent on follow-up actions and ensuring maximum value is derived from statements that have already been published.

Something that is important is that they don't just exist as standalone documents, but the FOC continues to build on the recommendations and the best practices laid out in them. Sometimes the issue might evolve. The statement on AI is focused on content moderation and facial recognition technology. Right now, there's a lot of discussion about the harms of generative AI. A question in my mind is, can we take that initial statement and maybe build on it, amend it, add an addendum to it or something? But that way, we're not just creating lots and lots of statements, but we're really building on the best practices and the foundations that are being defined.

Civil society stakeholder

⁴ <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/joint-statement/2023/transnational-repression/>

⁵ <https://freedomonlinecoalition.com/document/foc-joint-statement-on-artificial-intelligence-and-human-rights/>

Statements are more effective when they are amplified by member governments

Some stakeholders commented that joint statements should be published widely on social media, by the coalitions but also by members, in order to get greater pick up by the media. The 2023 MFC statement on Media Freedom in Hong Kong⁶ was published to mark the second anniversary of the closure of independent news outlet Stand News and during the high-profile trial of Jimmy Lai, making it topical. Various governments amplified this statement and there were official responses from the Chinese Foreign Ministry and the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

When governments repost statements on their social media and they start to amplify it and as well as with the advisory network we see a difference. I think the amplification by the members of the FOC is a really effective tool to both spread awareness, but also show that you're backing and supporting the statement.

Civil society stakeholder

It was suggested that the MFC and FOC work more on their media outreach strategies to develop a system whereby newsrooms can easily find and use statements as sources. Translation into multiple languages was also seen as an important way to improve awareness and outreach on statements.

Statements marking international days were seen as less worthwhile by stakeholders outside government

Thematic statements are sometimes issued in reference to noteworthy international days. For example, the MFC issues a joint thematic statement every World Press Freedom Day (May 3rd), as well as on the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes Against Journalists (November 2nd). These thematic statements were seen as less effective by stakeholders. They were viewed to be less action-driven and an inefficient use of resources to advocate for media and digital freedoms.

However, it should be recognised that there are also expectations, often from national CSOs, that coalitions should speak up on significant issues and key events. Refraining from speaking up is also a choice and might not always be well-received by non-governmental actors. Furthermore, thematic statements on international days can provide a “rallying point” for embassies of member states, many of which may lack the capacity to develop their own statements. Amplifying an existing statement is therefore an easier way to express solidarity with journalists in the country where they are based.

I know for them it's a visibility issue and they want to be seen to do something and say something on those important days. But I think that to me, the amount of time that they spend on that could be better spent, obviously, on other things that would really have an impact in terms of a specific case or a situation.

Civil society stakeholder

⁶ <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/joint-statement/2023/hong-kong/>

Consensual statements have power – but non-consensual statements can still be worthwhile

The merits of achieving consensus – where all member countries sign on to a statement – was discussed by all of the stakeholders. For many, consensus was the most important ingredient to a successful statement. As one CSO noted, “joint statements reached by consensus have the most power.” Consensual statements were seen to be more influential because of the numbers of countries that have agreed to the statement. They also demonstrate that despite political or other differences, all members have managed to agree without objections. The power of the collective voice was also a factor that was reiterated by national CSOs and journalists.

The double-edged sword of issuing consensual statements is that non-consensual statements are weakened by their limited signatories. That being said, stakeholders felt that non-consensual statements should still be published regardless.

I would rather have a situation where the FOC is publishing country specific statements which are signed on to rather than not publishing the statement because they can't get consensus across the governments.

Civil society stakeholder

Which countries sign – as well as how many – plays a key role in effectiveness

Stakeholders were keen to see a greater diversity in signatories although this seemed to be more perfunctory rather than recognising the impact this might have on effectiveness. Statements where Western powers – and the more the merrier – are signatories were perceived to be more effective as diplomatic tools in the eyes of all stakeholders (although some stakeholders noted that this might reinforce global power dynamics and is not necessarily reflective of the media freedom ecosystem). Non-governmental stakeholders emphasised that when such countries are absent from statements, their effectiveness is immediately undermined.

It's a shame (when) political considerations have trumped the urgency of the situation, especially when we're seeing things happen with near complete impunity.

Civil society stakeholder

Governmental stakeholders, meanwhile, commented that the absence of certain countries can make it less likely that their own government will sign.

It is therefore important to find a balance between language and signatories in statements. This means that compromised or even diluted language can be justified to some extent if the statement then becomes a vehicle for a set of countries to speak in one voice about a theme, context, or violations.

Smaller member states commented that they often did not have the capacity and resources to commit to all statements so had to be selective about statements to which they become signatories. One member state commented that “we do need to pick and choose, from a workload perspective let alone anything else.” Coordination needs to take into consideration the limited resources and capacity of all stakeholders.

Ensuring statements are timely is critical

It comes as no surprise that stakeholders saw the timing of statements as a critical factor in their effectiveness. Timing can make a positive difference when statements are published quickly in response to a specific event or situation, or when they are published to coincide with an event that is known about in advance. Statements that are published long after an event are seen as damaging, in particular those where individual governments have already long made public statements on the situation.

This is demonstrated through two examples of statements which were highlighted by the stakeholders. The MFC's Executive Group Statement on the detention of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich⁷ was issued two weeks after his arrest in Russia on March 29th 2023. Despite the number of signatories being limited to seven member countries of the Executive Group (the primary strategic decision-making body of the MFC), the statement benefitted from being published at a time when the case was a high-profile news story and therefore had purchase, being picked up by international media and prompting Russia to reference the MFC at the UN. Meanwhile, the MFC's statement on the killing of Shireen Abu Akleh was published four months after she was killed and received predominantly negative feedback (as noted above).

Given that joint statements in response to specific cases take time to produce – 2-3 weeks being the absolute minimum to date within the MFC – it is debatable whether it is better not to issue some statements. This needs to be balanced against the expectation that coalitions like the MFC and FOC should speak out about high-profile situations.

The process is cumbersome, but that's the process of international statements. There's no easy way. You can't negotiate a statement with a dozen other countries in an easier manner than that ... it's frustrating for us and we're in the heart of government and we know what the barriers are, we know how long the process takes, but it still frustrates us.

Government stakeholder

In the case where the coalition might be taking longer to issue a statement, it was suggested that the MFC/FOC could put something out to acknowledge that they are looking into the case because it has been flagged by their advisory networks as a concern and that a statement will take time to develop but will follow.

Stakeholders noted that using social media to disseminate statements could mitigate against the lengthy time it takes to get optimal agreement on a statement by member states. Some commented that member states who issued tweets or posts in relation to media and digital freedoms gain more traction than the joint statements published by the coalitions because social media allowed them to respond quickly and briefly.

We don't function quickly. It is simply not possible really. (...) What can be more effective than a statement when it comes to speed is a tweet.

Government stakeholder

⁷ <https://mediafreedomcoalition.org/executive-group/2023/media-freedom-coalition-executive-group-statement-detention-of-wall-street-journal-reporter-evan-gershkovich/>

It's important to be open about the process

Member states recognised that there may be a lack of awareness of the processes that governments have to go through to join statements. The decision-making behind those processes was causing a sense of frustration amongst Consultative and Advisory Network members, many of whom have proposed the cases and themes for statements in the first place. They also provide advice at all stages, including choosing cases, providing context, ensuring the inclusion of a rights focus in statements and recommendations for action. Members of the CN and AN viewed these roles as critical to ensuring that said processes are relevant and have concrete outputs.

Both groups of stakeholders wanted greater clarity and better communication, within the coalitions, on how and why decisions are made on both sides. CSOs wanted more transparency when their recommendations or inputs are not included in statements. They also wanted there to be greater internal communication about when advice given by the CSOs via the advisory and consultative networks had been taken and how. Member states wanted more information on why CSOs felt cases were justified. CSOs wanted to be included in decision-making processes from the outset.

It is always more effective if the advisory network is brought in from the start, as opposed to governments developing text, sharing it with the advisory network, us giving a response sending it back to the governments and then the governments taking the final sign off on it.

Civil society stakeholder

Both sides, government and CSO need to understand how the other side functions a bit better. I see the more that we work together, the more we will understand each other hopefully.

Government stakeholder

Recommendations

While these recommendations are primarily for the attention of the member states that constitute the MFC and FOC, the report recognises that both coalitions are collaborative initiatives and other non-governmental stakeholders would be involved in their potential implementation.

- **Consider whether a joint statement is the best approach** in any given situation, given the time they take to prepare.
- **Better define and articulate the purpose and objectives behind joint statements.** Alongside this, consider developing indicators, theories of change, and impact and effectiveness results measurements for statements, in order to improve and understand what drives effectiveness and impact.
- **Ensure better communication between stakeholders at all stages of the process** for developing and publishing statements. This can, for example, help ensure Consultative or Advisory Networks are informed about why certain cases or issues are – or are not – developed into joint statements, and why statements have been written in the way they have been.

- **Bring member states and other relevant stakeholders together to establish a deeper understanding** of the processes that governments and civil society go through in connection with joint statements. Regular interaction between the coalition members is also encouraged.
- **Improve outreach and dissemination around joint statements.** This could include developing networks and contacts in media organisations. At the very least, coalitions should actively encourage member countries which sign statements to amplify them via their websites and social media platforms as well as post additional commentary where relevant.
- **Ensure the content of statements is as strong as possible**, for example through:
 - Rooting the narrative of statements in international human rights principles and frameworks;
 - Underpinning statements with facts and figures;
 - Including clear and relevant calls to action.
- **Maximise the timeliness of statements**, for example through aligning case-specific statements with events or high-profile cases, and streamlining processes as much as possible. In situations where timeliness is important, consider whether a joint statement is the best approach or whether there may be faster alternatives.