

DIFFERENCE DAY 2019: WHO CONTROLS THE TRUTH?

In honour of World Press Freedom day, on the 3rd of May, Difference Day was once again hosted at Bozar in Brussels. During the day, two panel debates were organised, awards were handed out and about 200 high school students participated in several workshops with professional journalists. Given this packed agenda, it's safe to say that Difference Day 2019 was a big success!

Text: Sara Johanson, Lune Bernstein

MARCELA TURATI: AWARDED THE 2019 DIFFERENCE DAY HONORARY TITLE FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



Marcela Turati © Difference Day

The 5th Honorary Title for Freedom of Expression was awarded by the Flemish-speaking Brussels University, the VUB and the Francophone Brussels University, the ULB, to freelance journalist Marcela Turati from Mexico. Turati has been covering the consequences of the violence in Mexico unleashed by former president Felipe Calderon's war on drugs. She contributes to outlets including the Mexican magazine *Proceso* and the quarterly publication *Nieman Reports*, which is published by the Nieman Foundation at Harvard University.

Mexico is the world's most lethal country for journalists outside war zones, with 120 journalists having been murdered in the past 12 years since the war on drugs was launched. "In Mexico, journalists don't die in crossfire, they are being hunted," said Turati in her speech during the award ceremony. Turati is working to uphold journalists' rights and is behind the organisation 'Periodistas a Pie', a Mexican organisation that aims to raise the quality of journalism in Mexico through talks, meetings and

workshops. Due to the high rate of murders in the profession, they organize workshops where journalists can share their feelings of fear or guilt and give testimonies about surviving torture, or the murder of a friend. She is also a founding member of 'Quinto Elemento', a platform for investigative journalism in Mexico.

Government spokespeople

Speaking to her later in the evening Turati said that, aside from direct attacks on journalists, a big problem in Mexico is that there are no laws regulating government spending on advertising and many news outlets rely on public advertising, turning them into spokespeople for the government. "The government is paying those new outlets that speak well of them," she said. This was also the reason behind a recent critique of Mexico's president, who took office in December last year and who has accused a Mexican paper of being a political opponent and the spokesperson for a former president, a statement that has met with a lot of criticism from journalists in Mexico.

"90 percent of media murders in Mexico are not being cleared up. This is an invitation to continue killing journalists"

"This statement sounded like Trump," commented Turati, who, although she had supported the new president, was not 100 percent convinced of his actions since he has taken office.

She said that impunity in the country is a major concern for her. In her speech she recalled the memory of six of her colleagues who have been murdered. "None of these murderers are in jail," she said. "90 percent of murders of media professionals are not being cleared up. This is an invitation to the continued killing of journalists."

MARIANNE BOUCHART: KEYNOTE SPEAKER ON NEW TECHNOLOGIES AND JOURNALISM

During this talk about new technologies for journalists, terms like automated journalism, machine learning, artificial intelligence and deep fake videos came up again and again. Thanks to these new developments in technologies the communication landscape has changed. While this brings with it new challenges regarding disinformation and fake news, it also has a positive side in terms of improving journalism through data-journalism and automated fact-checking solutions. The panel focused on both sides of the issue during the debate. After the panel debate we spoke with keynote speaker Marianne Bouchart, who is the founder and director of non-profit organisation Hei-Da.

At Hei-Da, Bouchart focusses on using data for innovative and investigative journalism. "By helping newsrooms and groups

of journalists in mainly developing countries, we teach them how they can use data for their benefit so that they can develop new ways of storytelling."

Deepfakes

Even though Bouchart is mainly positive about the new technologies, she also issues a warning about the latest trend: deep fake videos. In these fake videos software is used to make videos that are hard to distinguish from real video's.

"Thirty years ago we thought the same way about photoshop, but now everyone knows that lots of pictures are manipulated. The same can now happen with videos. There is no evidence yet that these videos are already being used for propaganda or political motives. But just because it's only being used for fun now doesn't mean that this will not happen.

Journalists should really learn about it and be aware that it's happening."

Merging work on strands

Because of new technologies like this, Bouchart thinks that collaboration between scientists and journalists should take place. "There is no barrier, we have to merge work, scientists will do the groundwork while journalists plug in on it, ask questions and develop a more readable version. Researchers are making it harder for 'deepfakers', but journalists as well need to prove their trustworthiness. Prove that we're on it, that we're in control, that we will spot the faults and help other people spot the faults as well."

"Collaboration between scientists and journalists should happen"



Panel debate on technologies and journalism with Marianne Bouchart on the far left © UNESCO Liaison Office Brussels



Panel debate on investigative journalism with Eric Smit second on the left © UNESCO Liaison Office Brussels

ERIC SMIT: PANEL MEMBER IN THE SESSION ON INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM – SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Investigative journalism holds power to account and plays an important role in democratic society. However, it is also a journalistic genre that is facing constraints. It is more expensive to produce than regular news and those subjected to scrutiny might not appreciate it. How to finance and produce high-quality investigative journalism in today's media landscape was the topic of discussion in a panel debate with delegates from Estonia, Turkey, the Netherlands and Sweden.

Alan Rusbridger, former editor-in-chief at the *Guardian*, opened the session by explaining how the *Guardian* has successfully implemented a business model where journalism is seen as a public, rather than a private good. During the panel debate, Erdal Güven explained that 95% of media in Turkey is controlled by the government, which led to the creation of *diken.com.tr*, the independent online news portal where he is now editor-in-chief. It was not political, but rather financial con-

straints that led another panel member to start an online platform. We spoke to Eric Smit, editor-in-chief and co-founder of investigative platform *Follow the Money*. "We use an advertisement-free, subscription-based model where readers pay for the efforts of journalists," said Smit when we talked to him after the panel debate.

"People want to read unique, intense stories that bring out new facts into the light of public discourse"

"The reason we started *Follow the Money* in 2010 was that, at that time, journalism, and especially investigative journalism since it is the more expensive kind of journalism, was under pressure and the effort put in by newsrooms to fund it was diminishing rapidly. So we found it was necessary to do something about it."

Smit thinks that the situation has improved since then and that the media has started to understand the commercial value of investigative reporting. "People want to read unique, intense stories that are bringing new facts into the light of public discourse," he said. "This is what you get with investigative journalism and it is something you can distinguish yourself with in comparison to other media." He also believes that good content can be a business model in itself. "We have been able to break some big stories in the Netherlands that have made a difference. And when you're doing that you can see that people want to contribute."

DIFFERENCE DAY FOR STUDENTS

About 200 high school students participated in several activities on Difference Day. Varying from speed dating with journalists to workshops detecting fake news, senior year high school students had the opportunity to learn everything that there is to know about press (freedom).

SPEED DATING SESSION BETWEEN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND JOURNALISTS

High school students were invited to attend a student programme where they could listen to and discuss with practicing journalists. The programme included talks on freedom of expression, disinformation and the journalistic profession. Selma Stocker (17), Ariane Orlan (16) and Hannah Daladienne (16) from Saint-Boniface high school attended a speed dating session with participants from, among others, *Le Soir*, Amnesty International and two cartoonists. "We were discussing fake news and how the press can influence the world, but also the importance of freedom of speech," said Ariane. "We learned that we don't have to trust everything we see," added Hannah. "We don't discuss these things in school, but we need it and we want to learn it."

The girls were concerned that they had not learnt more about media literacy before today. "The problem is that the teachers are not trained for it," said Hannah. "But we learnt today about a project called Lie Detectors, where journalists are visiting schools to educate the kids about journalism."

Syrian cartoonist Hossam Al Sadi made a big impression on the girls, who described a huge painting that he had made together with other artists containing the names of the more than 12,000 children that have been killed in the Syrian war. "I was very touched by his story," said Selma. "And it made me see the extent, but also the limits of the liberties we have in Belgium."



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Hannah, Selma and Ariane ©Sara Johansson



Speed dating ©Lune Bernstein



©Lune Bernstein

VRT JOURNALIST SANNE BAECK A PARTICIPANT IN WORKSHOPS AND SPEED DATING WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Belgian VRT journalist Sanne Baeck participated in the speed dating for students round table. "It's part of my job to reach as many people as possible. Because I read news for youth channels Studio Brussel and MNM, I think it's interesting to be able to speak to the youth and also get to know how they feel about news, what they take from it and how they consume it."

In six rounds of discussions Baeck talked about whatever the students wanted to know. "Most questions they had were about fake news and propaganda, but some also wanted to know what it takes to be a good journalist or asked about tips for a good

interview. It's nice to see that the students really put effort into coming up with questions. They seemed genuinely interested."

Later on in the day Baeck also held a workshop whereby students got to read lines from a teleprompter to experience what it is like to be a newsreader. "The main goal of today for me is also to create enthusiasm among students, not *per se* for journalism but for them to be interested in news and current events. To raise awareness about fake news, to think twice about news sources and to not just believe everything you read on social media."