

Of foxes and paradoxes in the media henhouse

 By [Derek Abdinor](#)

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Future historians may well scramble to understand what was going on at the Media Freedom Conference in London and the simultaneous Social Media summit at the White House (held earlier this year in July). They will surely be confounded by media policy in the post-broadcast era by looking at these two events. And they will struggle to reconcile what is claimed to be policy against what is actually practised on the ground.



Image source: Gallo/Getty Images.

Hypocrisy, contradictions, absurdity – two media conferences held earlier this year in July had it all.

Firstly, to London. Who's going to denounce a [conference](#) held by the UK foreign office that announces a £3m fund to support global press freedom? The Media Freedom Conference was co-sponsored by friendly Canada (kudos) and keynoted by Jeremy Hunt, UK Foreign Secretary and best chance of denying a Boris Johnson a prime ministership. Everyone's favourite human rights lawyer, Amal Clooney, was the star speaker, lending it credibility and a guarantee the event would receive great media exposure.

This is the same Jeremy Hunt who, after the furore around the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi embassy in Istanbul, [lobbied to resume the shipments of arms to that regime](#). Bear in mind Khashoggi was a critic of Saudi intervention in Yemen and the arms that Hunt was so eager to flog would unquestionably be used in that war.



Why the Khashoggi murder mystery has dominated news headlines

Leigh Andrews 25 Oct 2018



Hunt is also involved in [the extradition of Julian Assange](#), who seems to have to learn the hard way that investigative journalists are celebrated when they expose “them” but not when they expose “us”. Helpfully pointing out that “we” are assisting “them” contrary to “our” stated policy may also not receive any gratitude.

Meanwhile, it seems that most major news outlets have dropped both the Assange arrest story and the Wikileaks exposés.

To toss some drift on to the already spinning ball, news was leaked at the time of the conference that Clooney had advised Assange on how to: Leave Europe without a visa; take up residence in Ecuador; and acquire that country's citizenship. Fair enough: this was while she acted as Assange's lawyer until the run-up to the 2016 US presidential election. But Clooney apparently had no compunction about appearing alongside the man pushing to ensure Assange tastes "justice" of one form or another.

However, Hunt and Clooney appeared to shrug off the issue and presented a united front on stage. Hunt had banned *Russia Today* and some other outlets from the event and both were notably unquestioned on Assange. [Clooney has a long track record of defending journalists](#) around the world, and the current cause célèbre Filipina journalist Maria Ressa.



Egyptian court sentences *Al Jazeera* journalists

31 Aug 2015



Furthermore, she has also won acclaim for a measured criticism of the [Australian raids on newsrooms](#) and the Trump administration for instigating violence against journalists with its constant tirade against media outlets it deems unfavourable. She will be assembling a panel to consult with governments on reforming media law and providing protections for journalists. So how can this Lebanese-British barrister be running with the foxes while she is hounding Assange with Hunt?

Which brings us to Washington DC, and the [Social Media summit](#). While summits usually signify key parties convening around mutual issues, it appears Trump chose to keep the occasion limited to conservative supporters who have built followings on the tech platforms and their concerns around censorship. So it was a small-tent affair, and will probably do nothing to stop those outside the tent – Facebook, Twitter, Google – from pissing in.

“ Today, I am directing my Administration to explore all regulatory and legislative solutions to protect the free speech rights of ALL AMERICANS. We hope to see more transparency, more accountability, and more FREEDOM! [#SocialMediaSummit https://t.co/i6th5qtfAj](#)— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) July 11, 2019

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Big Tech is a catchall phrase that includes the highest valued companies in the world that exercise an inordinate influence in all the digital fields of privacy, enablement, monopoly, censorship and security. Excluding these behemoths from dialogue or even making a statement is a missed opportunity; instead, Facebook chooses this period to [quietly release updated community standards](#) that refuse to disallow calls to violence against whatever they decide constitute “dangerous organisations”.

Trump arguably drives the most traffic on Twitter, not as a function of the number of his followers (61.9 million at the time of writing) but due to the exponential amplification that his every social utterance gets: retweeting, liking and reposting to start, print and broadcast coverage to finish. Newsrooms have been denuded of real journalists; Trump supplies excellent copy to fill the space. Yet Twitter secured a [court ruling](#) – in this of all weeks – that cautioned Trump that blocking users

unsympathetic to him would deny them First Amendment protection.

Twitter and Trump are both in a toxic relationship where the sex is worth the ugly drama but one party is getting his friends to send threatening messages and the other has the cops on speed dial.



What Trump teaches us

Damon Stapleton 16 Mar 2016



Two events, two governments extolling the needs for media freedom yet both acting unequivocally against journalists and media. In the selfsame week.

Of course, it's impossible to expect politicians to champion an unfettered press, much less decide who they will release taxpayer funds to. It's a situation ripe for abuse and the natural position of the press is to reject this. But times have changed.

Big Tech, meanwhile, is the press's current nemesis to a far greater extent than presidents and prime ministers: the advertising model that allowed the press to flourish is now broken for everyone but Big Tech and its vassals. In this country, and indeed nearly every other one, 90% of digital advertising revenue spend goes to a software company and industry bodies are not mobilising against it.

The paradoxes are instructive for South African media. Politicians need to be seen as supportive of media freedom while at the same time safeguarding their collective, but mainly personal, interests. Government's mouthpiece, the SABC, is a failure. Behind the scenes, it can influence media through the Public Investment Corporation (PIC) which [still has an appetite for spending on underperforming media outlets](#). Yet it yearns for more, knowing that a mouthpiece requires amplification and craftsmanship to turn a blast of hot air into a resounding melody. That's where Big Tech comes in and what keeps it in the megabucks. It is the distributor and gold mine, market expert and price-giver.



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Glenda Daniels 3 May 2019



Government still holds the most power, unaware of how best to wield it in a digital marketplace, rather like a naive prince seizing a castle but clueless how to hold it against the enemies within and without. Who will influence policy? The earlier model of ownership and the Fourth Estate is in turmoil; the prestige of owning titles that was enjoyed by the media barons is now gone. They've become less a Blackadder, more a Baldrick.

Prepare for this trend of government "assistance" to the media, while it sizes up Big Tech and considers regulation against both. Know the state of play. Be like Amal Clooney who seems to exploit the paradoxes of media freedom by dancing with the prince in the castle but lowering the drawbridge when the cause is just.

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ABOUT DEREK ABDINOR

Derek runs AQME, South Africa's network for independent publishers and consults to established companies in optimising their digital businesses. He would like to see a healthy media ecosystem where media, brands and advertisers can thrive; where foreign and corporate control of our digital media is limited; where free speech allows us to build the society we believe in; and the introduction of a new ethic that will portray our industry as one of virtue and value.

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