



**Fight
for press
freedom**

Strategic Framework: Free Press Unlimited 2023-2026

**FREE
PRESS
UNLIMITED**

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Approved by Supervisory Board December 8 2022

Free Press Unlimited was established following a merger of two media development organisations in 2011, with the aim of supporting press freedom and freedom of expression worldwide. In the last decade, Free Press Unlimited has grown exponentially both in size and scope, and continues to deliver high quality work focussed on supporting independent media and journalism. This would not have been possible without significant efforts to professionalise the organisation. These include setting up a structure that enables learning and development across the board. This structure revolves around central themes such as media viability and the safety of journalists. All of this has earned Free Press Unlimited not only international recognition, but also the trust of its partners around the world which is built on strong and ongoing relationships. Working collaboratively with partners on the ground to design tailor-made interventions to solve the global and local challenges they are faced with is part of Free Press Unlimited's DNA.

Over the last 10 years, FPU has been able to engage with, commit and offer support to hundreds of media initiatives and to provide support to thousands of journalists in distress globally. At the same time, it has advocated for a more structured and unified approach towards press freedom as the cornerstone of a functioning democracy.

We have helped independent media become more resilient and developed innovative projects such as the whistle-blowers platform [Publeaks](#), the online learning platform [Totem](#), the global emergency fund [Reporters Respond](#), and the A Safer World for the Truth initiative. As a result, Free Press Unlimited received the prestigious Dutch 'Geuzenpenning' award in 2015 which is given to persons or organisations who have fought for democracy and against dictatorship, racism and discrimination¹. This was followed in 2022 by another highly acclaimed Dutch award 'De Tegel', presented by Dutch journalists².

Press freedom is increasingly recognised by the public and democratic governments as the cornerstone of a democracy. An understanding of its importance has been demonstrated in recent years by the many initiatives that have sprung up. These include the [Media Freedom Coalition](#), the [Summit for Democracy](#), the [EU Media Freedom Act](#) and the 2021 [Nobel Peace Prize](#) which was awarded to journalists Maria Ressa (Philippines) and Dmitry Muratov (Russia). Such initiatives are not only welcome but also necessary, particularly following the impact on free speech by the COVID-19 pandemic seen within the context of a decade of a gradual but clearly visible decline in press freedom worldwide.

Free Press Unlimited sees press freedom is rapidly declining and is severely threatened in an increasing number of democratic countries (including EU member states. In other countries like Myanmar, Belarus, Nicaragua and Afghanistan, political oppression, including extreme violence against civil society

1. <https://geuzenpenning.nl/laureaten/free-press-unlimited/>

2. <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/nl/actueel/free-press-unlimited-ontvangt-extra-tegel-als-eerbetoon-voor-jarenlange-werk>

members and journalists, has an alarming effect on press freedom. Using news and information as a weapon through disinformation has never been as widespread during the pandemic and, more recently, the war in Ukraine. In the case of Ukraine, experts say we should have seen it coming, as the invasion by Russia was preceded by an intense online disinformation war.

In addition to politically motivated attacks on press freedom, the media landscape has undergone profound changes and continues to do so due to technologies developed by companies such as Meta and Google. While technology and digitalisation can provide an opportunity for inclusive dialogue, accountability and evidence-based advocacy, they also pose challenges when it comes to safeguarding human rights and fundamental freedoms both online and offline. The world is in a constant state of change

which brings with it a complex set of challenges. Therefore, Free Press Unlimited must shift its horizon to respond appropriately when developing its organisational strategy. This requires flexibility, persistence and creativity.

This Strategic Framework is not about changing the vision, mission and values of the organisation. Rather, it articulates certain elements of Free Press Unlimited's *raison d'être* that form the essence of its ambitions and which will steer its future actions. The Strategic Framework sets out the organisation's ambitions for the next three years. It includes a roadmap that strives to fulfil these through more focussed programmes, a restructuring of the organisation and finding innovative solutions so that Free Press Unlimited continues to be a relevant player in the fight for press freedom and freedom of expression.

1.1 Vision

Everyone deserves access to independent information. The basis of this vision is stated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights³:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

For most people in the world, access to reliable and timely information is not a given. Yet, every person needs independent information in order to assess and understand the world they live in and, in many countries, to make informed decisions for themselves and for their communities. If people do not know what is happening around them, it directly impacts their lives, prospects and opportunities. So, how can a person make autonomous decisions? In short:

people deserve to know

1.2 Mission

Free Press Unlimited’s mission is to make independent news and information available and accessible to all people, especially to those living in countries with limited access to information and press freedom.

1.3 Core values

Independent: Free Press Unlimited has its own independent strategy aimed at providing a variety of services to independent (media)partners and supporting the development of an enabling environment within which they can function. Free Press Unlimited does not accept assignments from financial pressure groups or political groups.

Inspiration: Free Press Unlimited aims to inspire global and local media professionals and organisations to use their diverse talents and opportunities to the full by sharing knowledge and ideas for cross-functional collaboration among equal partnerships. We are results-oriented, we make a difference, and we want to achieve social impact.

Inventive: Free Press Unlimited looks for smart and creative solutions, to enable free access to information, regardless of obstacles or barriers.

Dedication: We are an intersectional team of dedicated and intrinsically motivated people, passionate about contributing to the mission of the organisation.

Tailor-made: The local situation and culture is the starting point for Free Press Unlimited. We take into account the capacity of those in the media and their organisations. We are aware of contextual opportunities for growth as well as constraints such as the level of technological development or effects of (post)colonialism.

3. Universal Declaration of Human Rights – United Nations, 1948

1.4 The Theory of Change

Free Press Unlimited works with local independent media partners, both individuals and organisations, that can make a difference in the countries in which they operate. These so-called 'change agents' are the torchbearers of press freedom. They are on the front line, and strive to have a transformative impact. Free Press Unlimited works closely with such 'change agents' and co-develops interventions with them aimed at strengthening them, increasing the impact of their work and keeping them safe. FPU is active where its work is most needed, and is able to make a real difference in transitioning democracies, repressive or fragile, and (post) conflict countries.

Free Press Unlimited's long term objective is that:

Media and journalists, as independent players in civil society, constitute a diverse and professional media landscape and act as change agents on behalf of citizens.

Free Press Unlimited works to achieve the following three intermediate outcomes:

- An enabling environment for media is established, conducive to freedom of expression, pluralism and diversity;
- Media serve the interests of the public and act as a watchdog on their behalf;
- Journalists and media actors work professionally, are effective and sustainable.

Ambition 1

Free Press Unlimited is an influential international organisation for press freedom

In 2011, the newly created Free Press Unlimited organisation wanted to contribute to freedom of expression, independent journalism and social development and by doing so continue the legacy of its predecessors⁴. Free Press Unlimited inherited their predecessors' experience in partnerships for media support to independent media partners in fragile and repressive countries, as well as transitioning and developing democracies. At that time, Free Press Unlimited specialised in project implementation and technical assistance.

Today FPU is no longer known only as an implementing media development organisation providing services (capacity building). It has evolved into an organisation that has a strong international reputation for promoting and supporting press freedom and safety including online and offline security for journalists on a global scale. It has managed to stand out and is recognised for its work in conflict-ridden countries such as Sudan and Syria and its readiness to take on risks and do whatever it takes. Furthermore, the organisation's unique approach to innovation has resulted in projects such as the online learning platform Totem and [VIMES](#) (Viable Independent Media in Empowered Societies).

Free Press Unlimited also enjoys a long-standing track record for empowering independent media to flourish through evidence-based advocacy, creating and maintaining an enabling environment for press freedom and delivering impactful and innovative interventions.

However, FPU still depends on funding in a highly competitive environment. By positioning ourselves as an international advocacy and service organisation and by ensuring our work continues to be noticed for its high quality, we hope to be increasingly perceived as an important ally by potential partners. These include independent media groups, press freedom organisations, policy makers and other international stakeholders. Stakeholders can rely on Free Press Unlimited's excellent emergency response, learn from its in-depth thematic knowledge and its insightful policy briefings and depend on its advocacy work on press freedom.

We also hope to increase our visibility among the general public, both in the Netherlands and worldwide. Our objective is to expand public buy-in to the core message that underpins our work: press freedom and freedom of expression is important for everyone. Being internationally oriented means that the organisation also includes international staff who are not necessarily based in the Netherlands. We further strive to apply an intersectional lens to our programme design and implementation of all our activities.

4. Free Voice and Press Now

What does success look like?

- FPU is not just a partner but a trusted ally
- FPU is known for its in-depth expertise, innovation and evidence-based advocacy on press freedom and access to information which it offers to partners, governments and multilateral actors
- FPU has staff based in different parts of the world who feel 'at home' within our inclusive organisational culture
- FPU has an international advisory board
- FPU has acquired ECOSOC status enabling it to become an active participant in the UN system
- FPU is a critical contributor in global efforts to achieve relevant SDG 16.10 indicators
- FPU is the 'go-to' international press freedom organisation

Ambition 2

Free Press Unlimited ensures access to reliable information and independent media and journalism

Free Press Unlimited is known for its work in areas where press freedom is most at risk and where we can make a real difference. Free Press Unlimited has engaged with partners to set up media outlets in a

number of conflict-torn countries. These media outlets are often the sole and only reliable source of information, for example Radio Dabanga in Sudan. Another example is the development over the last 10 years of a large and complex programme focusing on strengthening independent media organisations and media support organisations from and for Syria. These efforts have led to a vibrant media landscape in and outside Syria.

While we will continue to focus on countries that are most at risk, we cannot ignore the rapid decline in media freedom in more democratic countries closer to home. As such, Free Press Unlimited sees it as part of its mission and mandate to also actively support independent media and journalism in parts of the world where authoritarianism is on the rise, for instance in the Western Balkan countries, Eastern Europe and in the EU where press freedom has traditionally flourished but has experienced a downward trend.

Independent media and journalism can actively influence and act as a catalyst for societal transformation. They are in a unique position to protect and promote the space for public debate. Free Press Unlimited has extensive experience in supporting independent media to play their role as change agents. FPU provides relevant information to the public and holds those in power to account on public interest issues such as corruption.

Quality journalism gives the public more access to reliable information and is a crucial antidote to disinformation and misinformation. Free Press Unlimited defines quality media content as content that conforms to ethical standards and is inclusive in that it relates to all social/political/religious and ethnic groups within society, including underrepresented

social groups. By inclusive reporting on themes that affect people and communities at the core of their work, quality media strive for diverse representation of people, their identities and beliefs, ensuring that all parties are heard through dialogue.

For Free Press Unlimited, it is equally important that independent media outlets are viable and resilient. Together with long-term partners, FPU develops methods that enable media partners to survive without resorting to propaganda or bribes and to be resilient when deliberately targeted. FPU's methods are co-created, innovative, and manage to bridge cultures and languages and deliver unexpected results.

The common elements of FPU's methods are innovation and knowledge-sharing. Independent media actors must be able to adapt to a changing context while safeguarding fundamental freedoms. Innovation goes hand in hand with flexibility and adaptability. Innovation means investing in social change and inclusion, as well as the application of new (digital) technologies. Acknowledging the existing North-South knowledge gap, Free Press Unlimited is determined to bridge this divide by promoting and sharing inclusive knowledge transfer among us all: partners, stakeholders and FPU.

What does success look like?

- FPU is known for its impactful and transformative interventions
- FPU is known for its innovative and experimental projects
- FPU provides added value as a critical partner for independent media

- FPU is successful in the development and viability of independent media
- FPU works on access to reliable information by supporting media in exile when necessary
- FPU supports independent media that provide quality content that is inclusive and functions as an antidote for disinformation
- FPU holds media accountable and ensure they remain critical

Ambition 3

Free Press Unlimited is financially sustainable

Free Press Unlimited raises funds for its objectives and activities through partnerships, subsidies and donations from private supporters, governments and other institutional donors. FPU's successful strategy for obtaining grants – mainly from institutional donors – will be continued while efforts at increasing unrestricted funding will be expanded. Having more funds which are not earmarked for a specific purpose will enable FPU to reduce its dependence on donor funding. It will also improve its ability to innovate and stay ahead of the game, by pioneering activities where they are needed or test new tools and intervention strategies. Funding that comes without restrictions to where and how it is implemented, is not easy to come by and takes time, dedication and perseverance to obtain. But once achieved it will give the organisation an impulse for incorporating innovative ideas and new technologies into its work and be of increased value to its stakeholders.

Free Press Unlimited has protected and, slowly but surely, advanced its independence from single donors while developing a solid strategic financial reserve. However, the ambition to become financially sustainable means generating more interest in our work from major donors and private funders. Free Press Unlimited does not necessarily want to grow financially or in staff numbers, but it does want to be flexible where its actions are most needed. By working to continuously improve the quality of FPU's work, the organisation hopes to further develop its unique added value and attract more attention from a variety of funders. Hopefully this will increase its chances of attracting more unsolicited funding opportunities.

During a time when press freedom is under threat, international solidarity and cooperation is needed to change the political parameters for press freedom and ensure more support. Therefore, to achieve its ambitions and to face the complex problems of today's world, Free Press Unlimited must expand its strategic partnerships. This might mean close cooperation with like-minded organisations on specific projects or themes. Free Press Unlimited is open to new partnerships.

Despite the fact that press freedom is declining worldwide, even in democratic countries, we also

see a counter movement. Some governments and multilateral organisations are willing to invest more to preserve press freedom by protecting independent media and curbing disinformation. This is a possible opportunity for Free Press Unlimited. Now more than ever our organisation is needed.

What does success look like?

- FPU has increased its unearmarked income by 30%
- FPU is innovative and experimental
- FPU is able to initiate important interventions and strategic partnerships when and where needed
- FPU is widely known as a pro-active and hands-on press freedom organisation
- FPU's interventions are increasingly independent of government policies
- FPU has several strategic partnerships with like-minded organisations
- FPU is able to attract private donors, funders and major donors

3. Our themes

In the process of formulating a Strategic Framework for the next three years, Free Press Unlimited has attempted to learn from both its failures and successes in different contexts. In part, it did this through the Deep Democracy methodology that enabled a broad and participatory consultation of all its staff and partners in early 2022. This complemented earlier Free Press Unlimited efforts aimed at gathering knowledge through conducting research and setting up dedicated task forces around several themes rooted in the organisation's mission: that everyone is entitled to access reliable information. These themes were also identified in the last five year strategic plan (2018 - 2022) and centred on media and accountability, media in conflict, media viability and enabling environment. Gender (now equity, diversity and inclusion) safety of journalists and innovation were considered to be so-called cross-cutting themes.

One of the most important conclusions from the consultations is that there is a need for more focus. Based on further internal discussions and an analysis of the results achieved, we choose to focus on the following three main themes for the coming years:

- **Media in shrinking civic spaces (formerly known as media in conflict)**
- **Safety of journalists**
- **Media resilience & viability (formerly known as media viability)**

1. Media in Shrinking Civic Spaces

This theme is a continuation of the theme Media in Conflict which has been at the heart of all of Free Press Unlimited's operations since its inception and has led to work in mainly repressive, fragile and (post) conflict countries. It is the core of what Free Press Unlimited does: providing access to reliable information where there is limited to no press freedom. Free Press Unlimited has gathered, and will continue to gather, a wealth of knowledge on this theme. This theme includes ethical journalism, accountability, professional journalism, media in exile, and quality journalism. In addition, there is a growing trend towards a shrinking civic space worldwide which calls for support in countries that are not necessarily in conflict but where media freedom is significantly at stake. This may require Free Press Unlimited to expand and continue its work in Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans and increasingly also within the European Union.

2. Safety of Journalists

The ever-increasing violence and impunity for crimes against journalists worldwide have led to the development of the theme Safety becoming from a one of our main thematic programmes, with its own budget and dedicated team. Previously this theme ran across-the-board of our activities. We see the prevention and protection strategies in a continuum. They overlap, are interconnected and mutually reinforce each other. Our Safety programme consists of three intervention strategies, the so called three Ps: Prevention, Protection, and Prosecution.

Prevention: FPU is part of several networks dedicated to the safety of journalists – both at grassroots and international level – allowing the organisation to provide preventive support to journalists worldwide, swiftly and in a coordinated manner. When it comes to advocacy, we actively encourage those responsible to put press freedom higher on the political agenda and to take concrete action.

Protection: In response to requests from the field and based on knowledge gathered during a decade of work through Reporters Respond, we will continue to expand our Safety programme by offering support such as legal defence services and psychosocial assistance as well as other forms of emergency support to journalists.

Prosecution: Where prosecution is concerned, FPU made its mark with the A Safer World for the Truth programme and put impunity for crimes against journalists on the world agenda. FPU will continue investigating cold cases and getting the wheels of justice in motion.

Lastly, online safety is becoming increasingly important for (women) journalists and media organisations. In this area, Free Press Unlimited plans to develop more (digital) tools to increase the online resilience of (women) journalists and media. The safety of journalists is also an important theme for Free Press Unlimited's policy and advocacy work at national and international level and is carried out with like-minded organisations and in cooperation with multilateral bodies such as UNESCO, OHCHR and the EU.

3. Media Resilience & Viability

This theme is the continuation of Media Viability. Free Press Unlimited's definition of media viability is the capacity of media to operate under sound political, legal and economic conditions to flourish independently and sustainably. However, trends over the past decade show that independent media outlets worldwide are struggling to survive. This is particularly the case for media in conflict prone and economically challenged parts of the world. There are many reasons for this struggle, first and foremost geopolitical conflicts, followed by increasing authoritarianism and media capture which impacts their freedom to operate and competition from large tech companies and social media platforms that limit the opportunities for economic growth.

In response to these challenges, most press freedom organisations focus on business model development to support media viability. Free Press Unlimited adopts a more integrated and tailor-made approach that does include, but is not exclusively focused on, business model development. Our approach is flexible and takes different contexts into account, aiming at the short as well long term resilience of media. Over the years, Free Press Unlimited has distinguished itself by working closely with partners to find alternative and innovative solutions to increase their ability to face the political, economic and legal challenges to which they are exposed. To embrace this approach and our focus more clearly, we have renamed this theme Media Resilience & Viability.

Integrated throughout are main themes are two crosscutting themes: Equity, Diversity & Inclusion and Enabling Environment.

Equity, Diversity & Inclusion

In light of disrupting and shifting power relations in our societies and in the media sector, Free Press Unlimited applies the lens of systemic **intersectionality**⁵ across all its main themes. The scope of this goes beyond gender and includes aspects like age, disabilities, beliefs and origin, depending on local buy-in and based on context.

Free Press Unlimited has gained valuable knowledge in the field of equitable access to the labour market in the media sector. We see the need to expand this added value to improve the visibility and working conditions of those underrepresented in the media industry. Therefore, all programmes developed within Free Press Unlimited will aim to promote equal access to opportunities and resources for anyone wishing to work in the media industry. To improve diverse representation of individuals, their identities and their beliefs in and through the media and to strengthen media's capacity for inclusive reporting on specific themes that affect individuals and communities.

By measuring the impact of programme formats that offer more diverse and participative content, Free Press Unlimited will be able to show its impact and added value when it comes to supporting media in fulfilling their role as catalysts for change and to their commitment to reflecting a multitude of lives and experiences.

Enabling Environment

The legal, economic and political frameworks in which media operate constitute the enabling environment in which media operate. Next to media, it also addresses the stakeholders and main actors such as regulators, governments and companies that are in a position to considerably shape and influence the media ecosystem.

Achieving positive change of the enabling environment is challenging in contexts of conflict in which many of our partners work. There are often divisions within civil society that make it incredibly challenging to forge coalitions to pursue common goals and create leverage with regard to decision makers. To continue supporting positive change, advocacy needs to be driven by national actors who understand the importance of taking action at the right time, who can develop constructive proposals and build longterm relationships with stakeholders. In that respect, we believe strongly in the value of building coalitions which is why we engage with partners to build national or cross-border coalitions to cooperate in achieving a common goal.

Public distrust towards journalists and media is high. This is exacerbated by the fact that many independent journalists and media across the globe lack the resources to develop quality journalistic products. By advancing the professionalism of journalists, the trust in and respect for their work by society will improve.

5. <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/what-is-intersectionality-explained/>

In addition, we lobby and advocate for their rights, for media freedom, for protection against the negative effects of technologies and digitalisation such as surveillance, cyber attacks and censorship. By sharing knowhow we strengthen the capacity of local partners, including civil society organisations and assist them with making a power analysis.

Over the years our efforts have been mainly targeted at international, regional and local decision makers to help generate international attention for national issues which can stimulate national discussions. For these reasons, FPU has been the driving force of several coalitions and an active participant in others, such as the international CSO Safety of Journalists Coalition, the Journalists in Distress Network, the Media Freedom Rapid Response Network and the Coalition Against Online Violence

4. What will Free Press Unlimited look like in three years?

Since its inception, Free Press Unlimited has grown into an internationally renowned organisation for press freedom. That growth has been made possible by critical and resilient media partners and the tremendous dedication and hard work of its staff and all its stakeholders. Free Press Unlimited has evolved from a Dutch media development organisation into an international press freedom organisation. To realise its ambitions, FPU will have to making some changes to its organisational structure and acknowledge advocacy and policy as a core activity similar to programmes.

Following this Strategic Framework, Free Press Unlimited will implement its new structure at the beginning of 2023. FPU will also develop new strategies on human resources, marketing, communication and knowledge management. The organisation needs to professionalise further. Staff must become more self-steering without becoming isolated and working in their own bubble, they must be eager to learn from each other, from partners and from stakeholders. To fulfil the mission and the ambitions as laid out in this framework, investing in South-North knowledge management, quality and fundraising must be a priority.

To that end, Free Press Unlimited will embrace the following principles:

FPU's principles

- **FPU is equal, diverse & inclusive:** within Free Press Unlimited and its work with partners, we are inspired by people of all socio-cultural backgrounds, genders, ages and abilities.
- **FPU has a critical workforce:** we are inquisitive and curious, we are open-minded, we can think systematically and be critical and constructive.
- **FPU is both local and global:** we are an international organisation that is locally rooted. We build solidarity and connect people across borders, regions and continents.
- **FPU has a safe environment:** based on our intersectional approach, we create a safe environment. By being a safe organisation ourselves, we set an example for others. People within Free Press Unlimited are encouraged to speak up and hold each other accountable.
- **FPU understands complex and conflictual environments** and knows when and how to be an 'impartial' arbitrator, helping to de-escalate tension, iron out problems and foster cohesion.

Free Press Unlimited is a member of and/or has links with the following organisations:



CAOV (Coalition Against Online Violence) (member)

JID (Journalists in Distress)
(coordinator / member)



CASE (Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe) (member)



LNJAR (Legal Network for Journalists at Risk)



Council of Europe Safety of Journalists platform



MFC CN (Media Freedom Coalition - Consultative Network) (member)

EU Media Advocacy
(member)



MFRR (Media Freedom Rapid Response)
(coalition partner)



Forum on Information & Democracy
(member)



PARTOS
(member)



GFMD (Global Forum for Media Development) (member)

SDG 16 coalition



HRDN (Human Rights Democracy Network) (member)



The Building Responses Together Network (Civicus)



IFEX (International Freedom of Expression) (member)



Vuka! Coalition for Civic Action

International Coalition of CSO organisations for the Safety of Journalists (co-founder and member)

The Building Responses Together (BRT) network

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