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U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

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Chairman Hastings, Co-Chairman Wicker, Congressman Cohen, and other distinguished members of the commission, I want to commend you for hosting this important hearing and thank you for inviting me to testify.

Over my career as chief international correspondent and anchor for CNN and also now PBS, I have covered almost every foreign war the United States has conducted since 1990, and interviewed countless world leaders, and I can tell you firsthand that press freedom matters.

I also know that a great America requires a great robust, fair and independent press. I have seen, that the difference between truth and lies, means the difference between democracy and dictatorship.

And this matters for the people of this country,  
and of the world the US seeks to shape and influence.

It matters for the [human rights defenders](#) who hold corrupt actors accountable.

My colleagues and I take The First Amendment to the Constitution seriously, with its strong legal press protections . I have seen with my own eyes how U.S. diplomacy has, historically, played a vital role in ensuring the right to free expression is protected around the world.

Yet in its own backyard, the U.S. has seen some deeply troubling press freedom developments.

Most recently, In May, police in Minneapolis, Minnesota, [arrested](#) several of my colleagues at CNN, including correspondent Omar Jimenez, while they were live on-air covering demonstrations following the killing of George Floyd. They were arrested despite offering to comply with police orders. , and with no reason given.

The U.S. Press Freedom Tracker is currently investigating [nearly 500 reports](#) of violations against journalists covering demonstrations across the country.

That includes at least 114 cases of physical attacks, 106 cases of rubber bullets being used against journalists, 69 tear gassings, 69 instances of equipment or newsroom damage, 68 arrests, and 33 pepper sprayings, as of July 16.

60-percent of those physical attacks, were by police—in many cases despite the fact that the journalists were clearly identified as members of the press.

I confess, from here in London, I was momentarily confused about what country I was watching?

The Committee to Protect Journalists has called these attacks [clear](#) First Amendment violations, which undermine the United States' ability to advocate for press freedom around the world.

And the political climate matters.

On a regular basis, the [president](#) and his administration denigrate the work of journalists and undermine critical coverage by labeling it “fake news.”

As I [warned](#) just after the 2016 election, when I accepted a CPJ award, these attacks are part of a well worn, even global, strategy to delegitimize independent reporting and inoculate any leader from criticism and accountability. The President-elect [reportedly](#) admitted as much to Lesley Stahl of CBS, in 2016, saying his attacks on we the press are intended to “demean” and “discredit” reporters so that the public will not believe “negative stories” about him.

Where has that left us? In the midst of this global pandemic, conspiracies, distrust of science, facts and evidence, have had deadly consequences.

The polarized political climate has forced elements of the media in the United States into political corners. This undermines trust, and the ability of the press to inform the public.

Additionally, there's a lack of standards and consistency across media outlets and social media platforms. Not all operators are bound by the same rules. Too many “media” outlets, are in fact fronts for lies and propaganda, reminiscent of state-sponsored news around the world.

The Committee to Protect Journalists found, that at the close of 2019, the number of imprisoned journalists around the world remained at record highs. At least 30 of the 248 jailed journalists, were held on false news charges.

I cannot tell you how many world leaders use the words “fake news” to justify their crackdowns. If it's a good enough bludgeon for the President of the United States, it's more than good enough for us, they reason. Governments around the world continue to pursue [“false news” statutes](#), now with the protective cloak of combatting the coronavirus pandemic.

Americans, as well as people and leaders around the world must know it will not be tolerated. Your democratic legitimacy depends on it.

I urge you to listen closely to civil society organizations that are monitoring and tracking violations in the U.S. and providing clear [policy recommendations](#).

Congress must ensure the U.S. continues to set an example for the world. And the best way to do that is to protect its robust landscape of independent media, and ensure journalists can cover the news freely and safely.

To quote *Invictus*, the favorite poem of your late great colleague Congressman John Lewis, Our heads “are bloodied but unbowed”.

We will keep up this struggle, because we believe that only the strongest, fairest, safest press, can properly underpin democracy.

Thank you again, and I welcome your questions.