

TWO EXPERT POSITIONS ON THE BALANCING ACT BETWEEN NEUTRALITY AND ENGAGEMENT

In today's increasingly polarised media landscape, the boundaries between journalism and activism are becoming more and more blurred. While journalists are traditionally supposed to act as neutral reporters, activists use the media to fight for their cause and initiate change. But what happens when journalists become activists? And how does this affect the credibility and objectivity of reporting?

We asked two renowned experts on journalism ethics to share their views on what goes too far—and on where activism is an essential driver of good journalism:

Barbara Trionfi, former Executive Director of the International Press Institute in Vienna and currently Senior Adviser to the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom. **Lutz Kinkel**, former Head of European Center for Press and Media Freedom in Leipzig and Lecturer for ethics in journalism at the Akademie für Publizistik in Hamburg.

POSITION 1

Exposing those who don't pursue democratic standards and human rights is not activism— it's a fundamental duty!

Interview: Johannes Wiek

Barbara Trionfi, Senior Adviser
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Media Freedom

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JW: To start off, can you tell us about a notable figure in journalistic activism? Maybe someone whose story highlights both the risks and the importance of this field?

BT: The first journalist that comes to mind is Dom Philips. He spent many years covering environmental stories in the Amazon rainforest and often travelled into the rainforest to see how indigenous communities protect their land. Sadly, he was killed on June 5, 2022, alongside indigenous rights activist Bruno Pereira, during a trip to understand the strategies used by indigenous people to protect their lands from illegal activities like fishing, mining, and logging.

JW: What exactly happened during that trip that led to their tragic deaths?

BT: Dom and Bruno were allegedly killed by fishermen who thought they were investigating their illegal fishing activities. Then Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro immediately blamed the victims, which sent a clear message that their killing would not be investigated. Like many environmental defenders before them, their killers seemed to be escaping justice, as if indigenous activists didn't deserve it.

JW: This sounds rather grim. I would assume that there was some form of public reaction to these murders.

JOURNALISM VS. ACTIVISM

BT: Dom was a foreign journalist freelancing for The Guardian in the UK, and his murder attracted international attention. This led to extensive coverage, which put pressure on Brazil to bring justice. Nearly two years after their murder, three alleged perpetrators are behind bars waiting for trial. There is now a faint hope that this case might become one of the very few crimes against journalists and activists in Brazil that doesn't go unpunished.

JT: Environmental journalism clearly involves significant risks. How widespread are these dangers?

BT: Journalists covering the Amazon forest, the Congo basin, the Niger delta, Papua New Guinea, and other dangerous environmental stories face serious risks. A UNESCO report found that 70% of journalists surveyed had faced attacks due to their environmental journalism, and at least 44 environmental journalists were killed in the past decade. Recent International Press Institute's research showed that attacks against climate and environmental journalists are on the rise, resulting in a huge loss of information vital to the public interest.

JW: Given these risks, what measures do environmental journalists take to protect themselves?

BT: Many environmental journalists emphasize the importance of performing risk-assessment analyses before going on assignments, adopting strict safety protocols, carrying safety equipment, and taking hostile environment training. These measures are essential, though not always sufficient, to keep journalists safe. Unfortunately, most journalists, especially those working for small or local news outlets or as freelancers, don't have access to these resources.

JW: The stories they cover are often crucial. Can you elaborate on the types of stories environmental journalists focus on?

BT: They often cover stories of indigenous people fighting to protect their land from exploitation by corporations seeking mines, fossil fuels, logging, monocultures, or real estate projects. They also report on communities living near coal mines, garbage dumps, or chemical plants that pollute their environment. For indigenous people and activists, this is a fight for survival and a clean environment. Their success is essential for all of us, as it represents a chance to slow down the climate emergency.

JW: How important is the role of journalists in these contexts?

BT: Journalists play a key role in exposing corruption, documenting environmental crimes, and giving a voice to those on the frontlines. Their coverage amplifies struggles that might otherwise go unnoticed, helping to garner the attention needed for these battles to succeed. However, this often puts them up against powerful players involved in environmentally damaging businesses, including private and state actors working with organized crime groups.

JW: With such dangerous assignments, do journalists risk becoming activists themselves?

BT: One of journalism's core principles is independence. Information must be independent to avoid becoming propaganda, advocacy, or opinion. Public interest journalism upholds democracy and human rights because that's where the public interest lies. Despite being mission-driven and passionate about their work, journalists are not activists. They don't pursue a single specific cause but aim to serve the public interest, democracy, and human rights.



→ **The International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists representing leading digital, print and broadcast news outlets in nearly 100 countries. IPI's mission is to defend media freedom and the free flow of news wherever they are threatened. It was founded by 34 editors from 15 countries gathered at Columbia University in 1950. Today's secretariat of the Network is based in Vienna.**



→ **The activities of the OSCE Representative on Media Freedom can be divided into two groups: observing media developments to detect early warning signs and helping participating states abide by their commitments to freedom of expression and free media. The current representative is Teresa Ribeiro.**

Read more about Forbidden Stories' Bruno and Dom Project, which continues the work of Bruno Pereira and Dom Phillips in the Amazon, on page 154.

JW: What are the consequences of blurring the line between journalism and activism?

BT: Treating journalists as activists undermines their perceived neutrality and objectivity, which are crucial for public interest journalism and their protection from attacks. Campaigns to silence critical journalists often portray them as biased or corrupt to undermine their credibility and legitimize attacks against them. It's important to remember that exposing wrongdoing and advocating for democratic standards and human rights is not activism; it's a fundamental duty.

JW: Thank you for sharing these insights. It's clear that environmental journalism is both vital and fraught with challenges. Your perspective has been invaluable.