

Media banned from recording Tony Blair speech at TFWA Conference

FRANCE. In an unprecedented move, TFWA has today banned the use of audio or visual recording devices during the speech by the Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, former UK Prime Minister, at the TFWA Conference on Monday.

Members of the media received the following email today from TFWA's PR agency Templemere PR:

Dear media colleague,

I am writing from the TFWA press office to let you know that it is not permitted to use audio or visual recording devices while The Rt. Hon. Tony Blair, former Prime Minister of The United Kingdom, is on stage.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact tfwapress@tfwa.com.

Kind regards,

Daisy Rachlin

(For and on behalf of the TFWA press office)

COMMENT: This is surprising news, which The Moodie Davitt Report has learned has been requested by Mr Blair's office as a condition of his speaking engagement (as opposed to being a pure TFWA edict). However, that does not make it right.

As reported, [The Moodie Davitt Report has been heavily critical](#) of the use of TFWA members' funds to hire Mr Blair as a keynote speaker, *writes Martin Moodie*.

I wrote in [my Blog](#) shortly after the appointment was announced: "Blair is now best (or worst) remembered for his role in misleading the British public and taking the UK into the disastrously ill-fated invasion of Iraq. A war that besides its immense and tragic human toll, had devastating long-term repercussions for an already volatile region. He is a hugely divisive figure in much of the world, despised by many. After all, the Chilcott inquiry in the UK concluded that the invasion of Iraq was unnecessary and undermined the United Nations. That disastrous war is Blair's enduring and shameful legacy."

All are symptoms of a global climate – one no longer limited to those parts of the world led by autocrats and dictators – in which suppression of independent journalism is increasingly becoming the norm. That makes life difficult for journalists, but it should alarm all of us, because a vibrant, free press – messy, imperfect and occasionally infuriating though it may be – is not merely a right accorded to an industry but a necessary condition for democracy to flourish. – The Irish Times, 27 September 2019

Whether you agree with that perspective or not – and we respect TFWA’s right to differ – the decision to announce a last-minute ban on recording the speech is a serious, and highly questionable, move. It is also a serious infringement of journalistic freedom and personal liberty. In this case, not surprisingly perhaps, by Mr Blair.

What does he have to hide? Is this not a public event? He and TFWA will no doubt argue, perhaps rightly on a technical basis, that it is not. Does that make this ban right? Why the late notice? How are they going to police the move? What if a TFWA member records the conference? Are they going to search members of the media (I guess I will have a personal frisker if I attend, which I now might). Will they search other members of the audience?

What happens if the speech is reported based on an audio recording? What is the difference between an audio recording and excellent shorthand notes, which most reporters are adept at?

All in all, an unfortunate and unnecessary twist to an already contentious situation.

A storm in a teacup as is already being suggested by some involved with the association? Or an important principle in an age that is witnessing the serious and escalating erosion of press freedom?

The basic human impulse for access to free information cannot be extinguished, and history tells us that free expression can rebound after periods of repression. But none of that is automatic. Rights need tending, guarding. They need constantly to be defended and fought for. And, right now, the free press is in the fight of its life. – The Irish Times, 27 September 2019