

FROM THE UNITED NATIONS

# FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Repressive regimes are intent on controlling the dissemination of information, including control of the journalists who collect news. These regimes use a variety of repressive tactics to maintain control of information and suppress its use. With the worldwide use of the internet, it is becoming more and more difficult for authoritarian regimes to hide and suppress their crimes from the public. The Chinese government has responded to the increase in internet use for spreading news by *increasing* internet censorship: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are all blocked. It is apparent that the Chinese government is threatened by overseas news and social media sites. In Beijing a naturalized American citizen was abducted and questioned for 21 hours about his blogging activities and search for the password for his Twitter account. In response to digital censorship it is obvious that new tactics are required to bypass restrictions.

The electronic genie is out of the bottle and a digital arms race is defining the control and dissemination of news throughout the world, Firewalls are not the only form of censorship. Increasingly, the press is silenced by an array of other tactics including prison and murder. In Iran, for example, is the use of the ‘revolving door’ where some detainees are freed but are at the same time required to post exorbitant bail and this then is followed by rearrest. These tactics lead to constant intimidation. Anti state charges such as treason, acting against the national interest, is a common charge against journalists..

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) ([www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)) at least 79 journalists were held on such charges in 2011. In Cuba, government authorities continue to detain reporters and editors on a short term basis as a form of harassment. More free lancers are being used as international news organizations reduce their budgets. Currently, 78 freelancers have been imprisoned worldwide. Free lancers are especially vulnerable to imprisonment because they do not have the legal and monetary support that news organizations can provide staffers.

In Egypt, Human Rights Watch has shown that free expression has deteriorated over the past year ([www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)) following the Arab Spring . Punishments for protesters accused of freedom of expression include military trials of protesters and bloggers and interrogation of journalists for criticizing the military regime and the suspension of satellite TV licenses.

Covering conflicts around the world has become extremely hazardous. The number of journalists imprisoned has increased more than 20 percent since the mid-1990s.

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In its annual census of imprisoned journalists CPJ has identified 179 writers, editors and photojournalists. Iran is one of the worst offender with 42 journalists behind bars.

For many years the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), a group of 57 Islamic states, have promoted resolutions in the UN Human Rights Council and the UN General Assembly to "combat defamation of religion " which is, in effect, the notorious laws against blasphemy or " religious insult" that call for restrictions on what people can say or write about religion. The good news is that last year the UN affirmed freedom of speech under international law. This affirmation states that restricting blasphemy, as such, is incompatible with universal human rights standards.

Blasphemy laws and punishment are harsh. A recent example of this took place in Malaysia where a Saudi journalist was deported to his home country to face arrest and possibly death for apostasy writing about the prophet Muhammed.

According to Freedom house only one out of six people live in a country designated as free which is defined as having access to a free and independent press.([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)).

Freedom of expression is a vital moral issue connected to human rights and recognized in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The UN celebrates Press Freedom Day every year and monitors and promotes freedom of the press.

Free speech is essential and a precious right. We need information to make decisions. What we don't know **can** hurt us.

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