

From the UN

Freedom of Information

The murder of journalists in Russia, the jailing of bloggers in China and the crackdown on the media in Iran, remind us that freedom of expressions is under duress, even in an area of expanding global communications.

Of the 44 journalists who were killed worldwide in 2010, 8 died in Pakistan making it the deadliest country for reporters, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. Also, Honduras, Mexico and Indonesia were dangerous places to work in 2010. The killers are rarely brought to justice.

At a time when technology is changing the way people around the world gather and receive information, when international news organizations are cutting back and closing bureaus, freelancers, local reporters and online journalists are more important than ever. They are also more vulnerable. About 90 percent of journalists killed each year are local journalists covering local stories.

Freedom of the press is a vital moral issue intrinsically connected to human rights and is recognized in article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. UNESCO, the UN Education Scientific and Cultural Organization monitors and promotes freedom of the press.

Unfortunately, according to Freedom house's freedom of the press index, only 17 percent of the world's people live in countries that enjoy a free press and 43 percent, that is 2.8 billion people, live in countries with a not free press.

A very disturbing development is that the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council of the UN passed resolutions that call for restrictions on what people can say or write about religion, especially Islam. These resolutions were initiated by the 56 members of the Organization of Islamic States. The concept is vague and subject to different interpretations. Poland passed a law requiring Polish media to "respect Christian values" violation of which may result in a prison term. Some governments use these laws to delegitimize minority groups, dissidents and other divergent views under the pretext of maintaining "social harmony".

A notorious example, journalist Mohageg Nassab had to flee Afghanistan because his newspaper, Women's Rights dared to call for a stop to the stoning of women. As a result, he was convicted of insulting Islam and sentenced to death.

One amazing development is "libel tourism". To get around America's strong first amendment protection, plaintiffs have been suing both British and American writers in London, where defamation standards essentially assume that the offending speech is false and the author must prove the contrary to fend off the suit. The enormous cost of litigation exerts a chilling effect

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on open debate. Often, self-censorship becomes the preferred course. Fortunately the US has taken a stand and enacted the Speech Act, which will make it more difficult to enforce libel judgements against US journalists.

The mushrooming growth of the internet has aroused hopes for increasing freedom. Some examples of the struggle between oppressive governments and its people in the electronic media are in China and Iran. In china, where many millions are online the government has erected massive firewalls. Even so, ultimately severe force was used to suppress a budding demand for more freedom. In Iran, during the green revolution technologies like facebook, twitter and blogs were used to organize street protests. The revolt was massively put down. The Iranian police followed the electronic trails left by activists, which resulted in thousands of arrests. Cybersurfing officers can now compile dossiers on dissidents without street surveillance and phone taps of the pre-net world.

In Tunisia, opponents of the regime succeeded in using the social media. Their example stirred revolt in Egypt. The attacks and detentions of journalists and media people in Egypt testify to the importance of information.

While regimes try to block social media websites, many have found countermeasures by using softwares called proxies and freegate. The genie is out of the bottle and ultimately governments will be unable to suppress the global communication technology. We need information to make decisions. What we do not know can hurt us.

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