

## **FROM THE UN: Dangers to Liberty of Expression**

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Most people, learning the news from public media, do not realize that freelancers are increasingly doing the news reporting. As a result of shrinking news budgets and changing technologies many of those covering conflicts—and often in danger—are freelancers without the supporting resources available to staff correspondents.

A notorious case is the beheading in 2014 in Syria of US freelancers James Foley and Steven Sotloff by militants of ISIS. There are countless other journalists that have been attacked, harassed, and kidnapped, imprisoned, or killed. The majority are freelancers.

It is the deadliest time ever for journalists. Local reporters especially face great danger. Very troubling is the news about Mexican reporters who report on organized crime and corrupt government officials. The justice system is incapable of prosecuting criminals and 90% of murders remain unsolved.

Ruben Espinosa, a Mexican photojournalist working in the State of Veracruz, fled to Mexico City after receiving death threats coming most likely from local government. In July he was killed in an apartment along with four other people. Since 2000 dozens of journalists have been killed in Mexico and about 20 have disappeared. A great number of these crimes have never even been prosecuted.

The Committee to Protect Journalists ([www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)) monitors the condition of journalists worldwide and helps those in trouble. Their yearly report for 2014 and their description of the situation for 2015 are devastating. The number of journalists in prison rose sharply.

Egypt has the highest number of journalists behind bars since CPJ began keeping records. The charge, as in many other countries, is anti- government activity. In one case six were sentenced to life in prison in a mass trial of 51 defendants. China is also a major jailer of journalists. Most were held on anti state charges. Turkey's very broad anti-terrorism laws have created a difficult environment for the media. Vague charges like religious defamation or insults to the Turkish people can be used to harass reporters.

In many countries journalists and bloggers face censorship in the name of religion. Countries most serious about blasphemy include Saudi Arabia and Iran. As an example Raif Badawi in Saudi Arabia who founded a website was sentenced to ten years in jail, 1000 lashes over time and a fine of 230,000 euros. In Iran, political criticism of the country's leaders and the Supreme Leader is considered sacrilege and can lead to very serious consequences.

According to Freedom House, in its 2015 report, global press freedom declined in 2014 to its lowest point in more than 10 years. Only one in seven of the world's inhabitants live in a country with a free press. The US was criticized for the police's detentions, harassment, and rough treatment of journalists during protests in Ferguson, Missouri.

Every year the UN commemorates World Press Freedom Day. Press freedom is enshrined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It states that “everyone has the right of freedom of opinion and expression and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”.

Some governments have challenged the universality of press freedom maintaining that this right should be curtailed to accommodate culture, heritage and threats to national security. This point of has been much debated but has often been used by authoritarian regimes to bolster their power.

Free speech is an important right. We need it to make decisions and to monitor what is going on. What we don't know CAN hurt us. For more information and to help, see Committee to Protect Journalists ([www.cpj.org](http://www.cpj.org)) and Reporters Without Borders ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org)).