



Press freedom in democratic countries – a trend in decline?

With a number of high-profile recent challenges to press freedom from within leading democracies, are those states habitually praised for setting an example now guilty of undermining respect for human rights elsewhere in the world?

Restrictive information laws, tighter legislation governing the conduct of the press, pressure to reveal sources, editorial interference from governments, financial pressures, online surveillance, applying anti-terrorism and national security laws to journalists and journalistic activity – these are just some of the issues to have threatened press freedom over the last twelve months.

The fact that many of these violations have occurred in countries perceived to have made a strong commitment to democracy (of which a free press is a key component), or that have historical precedent when defending and promoting freedom of expression, is all the more concerning.

While the 'usual suspects' continue to disregard a free press by jailing journalists or failing to protect them, closing media houses and stifling debate, we cannot ignore actions within societies deemed 'more free'. If the right to freedom of expression truly underpins all of our rights, then we have a duty to defend press freedom wherever it may be threatened.

Our debate will ask:

- Should we be concerned by recent challenges to press freedom or is there confidence that our democratic system will ensure rights are protected regardless?
- Do they constitute new threats or have they always existed? Have the media been complicit at all in contributing to the restriction of freedoms? If so, how is this perceived by the public and at what cost?
- Are international organisations and press freedom groups guilty of ignoring challenges from more established democratic states and failing to hold leaders to account?
- What are the implications for the media in countries with less established democratic traditions? Will attacks on the press in more open societies be used as an excuse for stronger oppression elsewhere?
- What can the media do to ensure essential freedoms are not further undermined?

Join us for an open discussion covering all the major press freedom issues and more, **3:00pm - 5:30pm, Sunday, 8th June 2014, Madrid Room.**

Confirmed participants:

Aidan White (Moderator) – Director, Ethical Journalism Network (EJN)

Mario Calabresi – Editor-in-Chief, La Stampa, Italy

Randi Øgrey – CEO, Mediebedriftene, Norway

Hoosain Karjeker – CEO Mail & Guardian / Chairman Print and Digital Media South Africa (PDMSA)

Francine Cunningham – Executive Director, European Newspaper Publishers' Association (ENPA)

Claudio Paolillo – Editor, Revista Busqueda, Uruguay / Chairman, Press Freedom Committee, Inter American Press Association (IAPA)

Guy Berger – Director of the Division of Freedom of Expression and Media Development, UNESCO

More information: <http://www.wan-ifra.org/articles/2014/06/04/the-2014-press-freedom-roundtable-press-freedom-in-democratic-countries-a-trend->

Press freedom abuses in established democracies

Press freedom rankings are not without their flaws, but the statistics from both [Freedom House](#) and [Reporters sans Frontieres](#) (RSF) reinforce the view that in many developed, democratic countries press freedom has been steadily eroded in recent years.

A particularly worrying trend is the use of anti-terrorism laws to suppress journalism, most notably the [UK](#) and US governments' attempts to stifle the publication of the leaked National Security Agency documents. But [draconian data protection legislation in Japan](#) and the recent charge [under anti-terrorism laws of an Argentinian editor](#) show that this is a global pattern.

Defamation laws continue to strangle free expression. In both [Italy](#) and [South Korea](#), defamation remains a criminal offence, which has led to the arrest and imprisonment of journalists in both countries, as well as creating a climate of self-censorship. WAN-IFRA's [soft-censorship reports](#) have begun to look into the phenomenon in more detail.

In post-crisis Europe, financial pressures are limiting media plurality in countries like [Spain](#), and forcing newspapers to accept encroachments on their editorial independence. Similarly, [Hong Kong](#) and [Argentinian](#) newspapers have seen advertising suddenly cut after anti-government coverage.

In Greece, Hong Kong and Italy, violence from police, extreme political parties and organised crime continue to endanger journalists and foster a culture of self-censorship.

The figures indicate a country's current RSF World Press Freedom Index ranking, compared to its position in 2010.

United Kingdom 33 (-14)

- The British government attempted to suppress the publication of the files leaked by former NSA contractor Edward Snowden, including the [forced destruction of hard drives](#) at the Guardian offices. The security services used anti-terrorism laws to [detain David Miranda](#) at Heathrow airport, while WikiLeaks editor [Sarah Harrison](#) cannot return to the UK for fear of arrest.
- The [Royal Charter](#) proposed after the [Leveson](#) inquiry into press standards and intrusion was criticised by many as restrictive of press freedom. It introduces a level of statutory oversight of a previously self-regulated industry, leading to concerns of political interference. Most newspapers have refused to sign up to the proposed system, instead joining together to create a new regulatory body, the [Independent Press Standards Organisation](#) (IPSO).

United States 46 (-26)

- Though the US constitution provides better protections to newspapers than in the UK, concerns over “national security” have also been used to quash the press. This includes attempts by government officials to stop the publication of NSA documents papers, and the prosecution of whistleblower [Bradley \(now Chelsea\) Manning](#).
- The absence of a federal “shield law” to protect journalists from having to reveal their sources has attracted criticism, with [RT](#) reporting that a number of US journalists have been issued with subpoenas and pressured into revealing sources. The [Free Flow of Information Act](#) has yet to be passed, and fails to protect a variety of non-traditional journalists.
- In May 2013, the [Associated Press learned that US authorities had seized records](#) of their phone calls, potentially revealing communications between journalists and sources. The timing of the seizure suggests it was related to an AP investigation of the CIA’s disruption of a terror plot.

South Africa 42 (-4)

- The controversial [“secrecy bill”](#) threatened investigative journalism, introducing heavy prison sentences for those accessing, disseminating or retaining classified information. In September 2013 President Zuma refused to sign the bill, sending it back to parliament because it did not pass “constitutional muster.”
- The [Globe and Mail](#) reported on the Chinese government’s purchase of a stake in one of South Africa’s largest media groups, raising concerns that China is attempting to influence coverage of its relations with the country and of the ANC government.

Italy

49 -

- [Defamation continues to be a criminal offence in Italy](#), and reform to resolve this has only been partial. Article 19 said that “several provisions of the Defamation Law are incompatible with international freedom of expression standards.”
- [Several journalists were given prison sentences for defamation during 2013](#).
- [Organised criminal organisations](#) continue to wield influence through ownership/financial support of the media, while threats and intimidation have led to self-censorship in many parts of the country.

ROK

57 (-15)

- [According to RSF](#), two journalists were accused of broadcasting “false information” and “defamatory content” about President Park Geun-hye’s brother and father in their satirical podcast “Naneun Ggomsuda.”
- [Defamation continues to be a criminal offence](#), with a prison sentence of up to 7 years.
- Even if information published is true, it is no guarantee against prosecution.
- Under the [National Security Act](#) it is illegal to "praise, encourage, disseminate or cooperate with" enemies of the state, specifically North Korea. In 2012 a blogger from Seoul was arrested and his documents searched due to his satirical comments and tweets about the totalitarian state.

France

39 (+4)

- In May 2013, a French court [ordered the news organisations Le Point and Mediapart](#) to remove all copies and transcriptions of recordings made at the home of L’Oreal heiress Liliane Bettencourt, and forbade future publication, effectively creating judicial censorship of material in the public interest.
- [According to Freedom House](#), “access to sources and editorial independence suffered some setbacks surrounding the 2012 presidential and legislative elections.” Journalists were denied access to immigrant detention centres in an attempt to deflect attention from the controversial issue.
- [The Index on Censorship](#) describes how “losing a libel case against a public official carries a higher fine (€45,000) than libel against a private individual (€12,000), which chills public interest criticism of politicians and government officials.”

Japan 59 (-48)

- Japan's press freedom has plummeted under Shinzo Abe's government. [A draconian "State Secrets Law" was passed at the end of 2013](#), despite widespread outrage and opposition in the Japanese Parliament. NPR reported that the US had been placing pressure on its Asian ally to exert more control over classified information.
- The move came after revelations about the government's mismanagement in relation to Fukushima. The tough new punishments for anyone accessing or disseminating classified investigation pose a grave threat to investigative journalism.
- [RSF "deplores the climate of censorship and self-censorship that continues to prevail in discussion of nuclear energy in Japan."](#)

Hong Kong 61 (-27)

- After recent protests about the state of press freedom in Hong Kong, [journalist Shirley Yam told CNN](#): "Headlines were added, complete pages were removed, photos were cancelled, interviews were bought, columnists were sacked. We get calls from senior government officials, we get calls from tycoons, saying 'we don't want to see this in your paper.'"
- The report also describes how [Chinese companies suddenly and simultaneously withdrew funding](#), apparently due to the paper's criticism of China.
- [Index on Censorship](#) quoted an anonymous journalist about the prevalence of self-censorship: "It's a creeping, insidious type of thing. If you want to keep your job, you toe the line. I work with guys who are pro press freedom, but they are still censoring constantly."
- Kevin Lao, former editor of a Hong Kong newspaper critical of China, was stabbed multiple times a few days after protests against media censorship.

Greece 99 (-29)

- Economic pressures appear to have led to a [press crackdown in Greece](#). In 2012 magazine editor Kostas Vaxevanis was arrested for publishing the names of wealthy Greeks with Swiss bank accounts. In June 2013 the state broadcaster was shut down by ministerial decree. According to Freedom House, [a journalist was arrested a day before he was due to broadcast allegations](#) regarding the government's alteration of data,
- The influence of far-right party Golden Dawn has led to an atmosphere of intimidation, while several journalists have been beaten by police.
- The increasing financial problems of many Greek newspapers have led to concerns over editorial independence, particularly with regards to coverage of the government's controversial austerity measures.

Spain 35 (+4)

- The EU's controversial ["right to be forgotten"](#) ruling originated in Spain, where the Data Protection Agency forced Google to remove certain information about individuals from its results. The ruling allows users to demand that websites remove information that is deemed outdated or irrelevant, posing a threat to news organisations' online content.
- The consequences of the economic crisis in Spain bear similarities to Greece. Dwindling resources have led to staff dismissals and the reduction of media diversity, while state-employed journalists critical of the government's austerity measures have been fired.
- [In an interview with the NYT](#), ousted editor of El Mundo Pedro J. Ramirez claimed that his removal was a "show of force" to stop journalists from criticising the government. Ramirez oversaw a series of corruption investigations, including one involving Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy.

Hungary 64 (-21)

- Hungary's once impressive press freedom has suffered from retrograde changes in law under its right-wing government. [According to Christian Science Monitor](#) these include "huge fines for "imbalanced" or "insulting" coverage, weakened protections for journalistic sources, and a regulatory Media Council to enforce the law with a minimum of checks to its power."
- Heavy fines have led to a high degree of self-censorship, and there have been widespread reports of journalists being told what questions to ask politicians, specifically PM Viktor Orban. Those who have challenged this have been removed.

Argentina 55 -

- In May 2014, [RSF reported an Argentinian editor was facing a 12 year prison sentence](#) under anti-terrorism laws for his coverage of police demonstrations for more pay in the northern city of Santiago del Estero last December.
- Government moves to break up monopolies and increase media plurality are widely viewed as an attempt to undermine the media establishment, forcing groups like Grupo Clarin to lose licences and therefore revenue.
- [Quoted in the Daily Telegraph](#), Ricardo Kirschbaum, editor-in-chief of Clarin said the purpose of the media offensive is "the control of all the media possible – public and private – and the destruction of those which do not align themselves unconditionally.
- Reports suggest that the government placed pressure on companies to withdraw advertising from certain newspapers, including La Nacion.