

“Free the Press: Why Media Freedom Makes Societies Healthier”

Ambassador Beatrice Welters

Information is power. Few people can make a living, hold their governments accountable, and educate their children without a healthy supply of free-flowing information. Citizens need accurate, timely, independent news they can trust. So do businesses and markets. And so do governments.

Media freedom keeps societies and economies vibrant, energetic, and healthy. When the free flow of news and information is cut off, individuals suffer. Societies suffer. Economies suffer.

Yet as people around the world observe World Press Freedom Day on May 3, threats against journalists are rising. As of last December, the Committee to Protect Journalists counted 179 reporters in jail around the world. And journalists continue to be threatened, attacked, disappeared, or murdered for trying to report the news.

In the past year, the world witnessed both the promise of, and the peril to, a free press. Throughout the Middle East and North Africa, journalists, bloggers, filmmakers and pundits chronicled the protests sweeping across the region, while some citizens armed with nothing but cell phones risked their lives to upload the truth – by text, tweet, and pixel. Many have risked their lives, some have lost them, including Marie Colvin and Remi Ochlik, who were killed by shelling in Syria earlier this year.

By trying to tell the truth, they were exercising a fundamental freedom enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

Yet too many governments attempt to censor the media, directly or indirectly. Too many investigative journalists are being silenced, many for exposing corruption – at local, state, or national government levels. Too many attacks and murders of journalists go unpunished.

In some cases, it is not just governments attacking, intimidating, and threatening journalists. It's also criminals – drug cartels – terrorists or political factions.

The people of the Caribbean have long enjoyed a vibrant and combative free press that holds democratically-elected governments accountable for their actions. But even in this region there have been disturbing reports of advertising boycotts directed at media outlets that criticize governments, and even the surveillance and harassment of journalists.

Even actions by authorities that are not meant to restrict press freedom can have a chilling effect as journalists become reluctant to cover sensitive topics. This ultimately harms democracy, since the public relies on a robust and free exchange of ideas and unfiltered access to news and information. When journalists are threatened or harassed, other journalists self-censor. They stop reporting stories. They tone down stories. They omit details. Sources stop helping them. Their editors hesitate to print stories. Fear replaces truth. All of our societies suffer.

As World Press Freedom Day approaches, the United States calls on all governments to take the steps necessary to create space for independent journalists to do their work without fear of violence or persecution. We pay special tribute to those courageous journalists, bloggers, and citizens who have sacrificed their lives, health, or freedom so that others could know the truth. And we honor the role of free and independent media in creating sustainable democracies and open, healthy societies.

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