

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

**By Joseph A. Mussomeli, U.S. Ambassador to Slovenia, Večer, May 4, 2012**

"Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." So said Thomas Jefferson more than 200 years ago, and it still rings true. Nothing, not even a democratic government is more important to a free people than a free press. 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 even 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 in Slovenia and around the world observed World Press Freedom Day, earlier this week, 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, 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.

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. When journalists are threatened, attacked, jailed, or disappeared, 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.

The United States recognizes Slovenia's deep commitment to press freedom. We see it every day throughout the media landscape here. But there is more to press freedom than merely writing whatever journalists want to write. In Slovenia press freedom is at risk in two ways. First, self-censorship in the Slovene press impedes having a genuinely free media. For example, there is little advancement toward true post-WWII reconciliation due in part to under-reporting the still sensitive topic of post-war atrocities. While the laws and constitution of Slovenia protect the freedom and rights of journalists, those who boldly investigate activities or conduct that others want to keep hidden may pay a price for doing so. A free press cannot thrive unless journalists feel free to pursue all stories without fear of retribution.

The second impediment to a truly free press in Slovenia is the dearth of professionalism. The development of journalism in Slovenia is not yet complete. The lack of professional standards and quality investigative journalism on the one hand and the increase of tabloidization on the other hand,

make much journalism in Slovenia seem immature and unprofessional, and most worrisome, lacking credibility. Slovenia lacks a sufficient number of good investigative journalists who are dedicated to the main role of the media to represent the public and serve as watchdogs over misuses of power in society. It seems that many journalists are merely interested in making a story sensational instead of presenting credible information. Journalists must resist the temptation to pursue stories only that satisfy their own political leanings or that satisfy the public demand for entertainment. Oscar Wilde once cautioned that the “public has an insatiable curiosity to know everything. Except what is worth knowing. Journalism, conscious of this, and having tradesman-like habits, supplies their demands. “

By the same token, it is unfortunate that so often politicians seek litigation as a means to respond to an active press. Such actions can have a chilling effect on the media’s role in investigating activities that potentially violate the public trust.

The U.S. Embassy here in Slovenia is invested in press freedom, not just on World Press Freedom Day, but throughout the year. In March and April on SLOcast, the Embassy’s audio podcast available at [www.slocast.si](http://www.slocast.si), we compiled conversations with leading Slovene journalists about the invaluable role of the media in society in Slovenia and around the world.

As we observe World Press Freedom Day this week, 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. And here in Slovenia and the United States we should especially remember the sage words of Mark Twain: "There are laws to protect the freedom of the press's speech, but none that are worth anything to protect the people from the press" When the press loses the respect of its readership, when the media loses its credibility with the public, we are in as dire a situation as when governments control the media.