

Media: Freedom in Focus

by Mia Doornaert

"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 regardless of frontiers." (Article 19 — Universal Declaration of Human Rights). This right is increasingly recognized, but often not enacted, or blocked by so many obstacles that it cannot function. UNESCO, on the invitation of its Member States, has undertaken the task of "promoting the free flow of information at international and national levels ... and better balanced dissemination of information without any obstacle to freedom of expression". Taking the global situation into account, and despite the paradoxical hesitation of donors, the Organization has launched activities promoting media independence at an ethical and legislative level, through better training for journalists, by supporting a vast operation to bolster Africa's new newspapers and offering emergency help to the media of ex-Yugoslavia.

I drop by the secretariat of the International Federation of Journalists. The "electronic mailbag" of IFEX (International Freedom of Expression Exchange — see box) has just been emptied. The harvest of just one day doesn't look very promising. A newspaper closed in Romania, another one in Lebanon, an issue of a paper seized in Turkey, death threats against a journalist in Venezuela, new restrictions on the press in China, two journalists arrested in Cameroon, an appeal for help from a radio station in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Some good news though: a new Jordanian law gives journalists better protection against prosecution.

In press freedom in the world on the march or under greater attack? The answer is probably both, the one because the other. However it is clear that there is a new assertiveness by journalists, editors and publishers, in many countries and cultures on all continents. There is a new awareness that freedom of expression and press freedom are not only essential political rights, but also a part of the dignity which is the birthright of all human beings, their right to think and speak freely. Those freedoms are also a condition for sound and sustainable economic development. The economic and environmental debacle in the former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe proved it once again. If there is no control by the public, by an independent and vigilant free press and media, disastrous economic and environmental policies, corruption and waste of national resources continue unchecked.

Demands to protect the rights of press and media workers, the right to do their job without threats to their freedom, personal integrity and life, are the concern of all. For society has the right to be informed and to know. Without these rights, freedom of opinion becomes only the freedom to hold and express badly informed opinions.

Many governments still do not recognise this, and exercise total or a very large control on their media. In most Middle East countries for instance, press freedom remains little more than an aspiration.

Air Waves and Borders

Nevertheless, the explosion in communications technologies, the arrival of faxes and modems, makes it more and more difficult to seal borders against information. This may not directly effect the national situation of press freedom, but it does make it more difficult for governments to isolate citizens from external information and censor human rights violations, including freedom of expression.

The availability of international radio broadcasting stations, such as the BBC World Service, is already well known. Now, satellite dishes are becoming more accessible, and will make it even more difficult for governments to control the air waves. An example of this is the London based Middle East Broadcasting Centre, the first privately owned Pan-Arab television station, which reaches an estimated 14 million people in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa.

The new assertiveness in many countries, of publishers, editors and journalists is another encouraging sign. But it also provokes a backlash, from governments who prefer to keep the lid on their actions and crimes, from powerful economic interests and from organised crime. The murders of journalists and the bomb attacks against the media by the drug-traffickers in Colombia, and so called government-linked "death squads" in other Latin American countries, have been well doc-

Freedom of Expression should be Universal

Following is an editorial broadcast by the Voice of America on July 30, reflecting the views of the US government.

One of the most fundamental of all human rights is the freedom to hold opinions and to express them in speech or writing. This right is recognized in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As the declaration says, "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes the freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Despite these words, the governments of many countries still do not respect freedom of opinion and expression. On nearly every continent, men and women continue to be thrown in jail for nothing more than expressing opinions that do not meet the approval of govern-

ment authorities. Last week in Africa, for example, Nigerian police shut down several newspapers and a radio station. The police ransacked the newspaper offices and took away at least two journalists. Nigerian police have jailed journalists several times this year. Last week in the Middle East, a newspaper editor was detained by Saudi Arabian authorities because his paper published an American comic strip that some people deemed offensive on religious grounds. This is the second time this year that the Jeddah-based Arab News, an English-language daily, has been in trouble with the government. In February, the editor-in-chief was forced to resign after the paper published a wire-service report that contained criticism of the leader of a neighboring country. One of the countries where freedom of expression is severely restricted is China. Some Chinese, such as Wei Jingsheng, have been in prison since the government cracked down on the "Democracy Wall" dissidents in 1979. Many more Chinese were imprisoned after the crushing of the 1989 pro-democracy movement, and some of them remain there still. The United States is committed to promoting freedom of expression and other human rights on every continent. As Secretary of State Warren Christopher said at the recent World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, the US "agrees for freedom must embrace every prisoner of conscience, every victim of torture, every individual denied basic human rights. It must also encompass the democratic movements that have changed the political map of our globe."



THE SPREAD OF FREE INFORMATION

The ways of muzzling the press are many and varied, ranging from censorship to imprisonment or even the execution of journalists and, more subtle, economic pressures that limit independence. Despite the progress of the past decade, press freedom is not a universally acquired right. The map presents the state of affairs according to an investigation by Reporters Sans Frontieres.



umented. In Nigeria, where a trend to economic and political liberalisation was accompanied by a liberalisation in the press, the government is turning back the clock. According to a May 6, 1993, Kaduna Radio broadcast, the Government of Nigeria passed a Treasonable Offences Decree earlier that month which states that anyone who is judged to have disrupted "the general fabric of the country or any part of it" in speech or writing is liable to be sentenced to death.

Violence and intimidation are not the only threat to press freedom. Real freedom demands access to technical facilities. Too many governments retain a large measure of influence through their control of printing and distribution facilities, and their use of import and export licences to "discourage" the business world from placing advertisements in "unfriendly" newspapers and magazines. Real press freedom demands that journalists' material, moral and legal status are protected from undue influence from whatever source.

A free media is certainly a condition for a sound and sustainable economic development, but the opposite is also true. One of the main obstacles to media development is the lack of infrastructure, and the absence of a market of readers and advertisers. This means that many independent papers and broadcasting facilities work with a very small budget and are extremely vulnerable to all kinds of pressure.

Journalists in developing countries are often very poorly paid and are obliged to have a second job to support themselves and their families. This, of course, takes away from the quality and integrity of their journalistic work. Finding solutions for this chicken-and-egg problem of the link between press freedom and economic development remains a major challenge.

Nationalism

At the end of the 20th century, another growing threat in the "First" as well as the "Third" World, is the resurgence of nationalism, which is often, but not always, linked to religion. Journalists who dare to report freely, or criticize their political leaders, are often branded as traitors to their nation, to their culture, or their religion. In a situation of civil strife or war, this pressure is very difficult to withstand. Journalists feel torn

between their loyalty to their people and their duty to report honestly and freely. The fundamental duty, of course, is to choose the truth, not to take sides.

Very worrying in this context is the perversion of the word "culture". Those who advocate change and reform and freedom, are quickly branded as traitors. But culture has always meant change and progress, never paralysis. Cultures have always developed in exchange and friction with each other. It is never a betrayal to one's own

culture to learn from others. And culture has never meant the uncritical acceptance of existing wisdom. One of the most important documents of our time is the Declaration of Human Rights. It is the recognition, by the world community, of the universality of human rights; the equality of all. The rights enshrined in that document were, at the beginning, advocated by individuals or small minorities, who were often ridiculed, persecuted, tortured and killed by political or religious powers. But their ideas

won the day. I have never understood why some people could pretend that freedom of expression, freedom of the press, democratic freedoms is alien to some cultures. To imply that some peoples, some nations are, by nature or culture, unfit for freedom, and that the truth should be hidden from them because they wouldn't know what to do with it strikes me as a sentiment filled with prejudice and sinister political intent. And which "cultural values", which Divine Revelation, can justify discrimi-

THE situation of the press throughout what was once Yugoslavia "has become desperate" says Lee Woodyear, the human rights specialist of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). Thirty-three journalists have been killed there since June 1991; according to the IFJ, the world's leading journalist organization which has close ties with UNESCO.

"Journalists on a wide scale and in every republic and territory of ex-Yugoslavia are coming under more and more pressure. In Croatia, independent journalists do not believe that they have an independent media outlet in the republic. In Kosovo, the Albanian population of some two million has no information or news outlet. In Montenegro, journalists criticizing the local government or the policies of the ruling parties in Belgrade receive more direct and indirect harassment. In Macedonia, the independent press has few resources. And in Serbia, it is gradually being eliminated," he says.

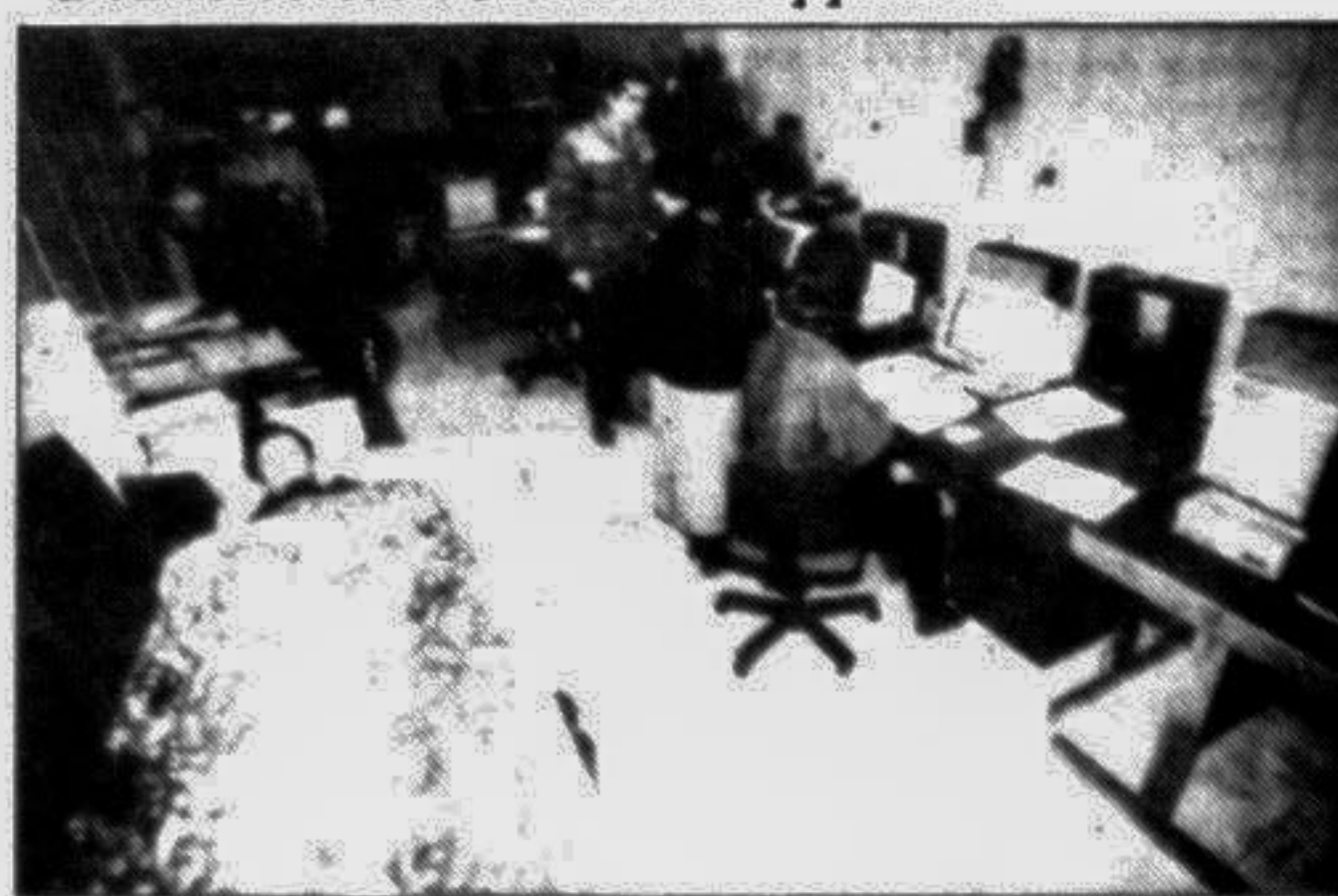
Reporters are no longer free. When they are not facing soldiers' bullets, they must wrestle with official pressure and ethnic hatreds. War-ravaged Bosnia is no exception. The journalists there are prime targets, and everywhere, the press is being muzzled, either by conflict, the authorities or economic difficulties.

"We have seen terrible situations in the past" said Nick Filmore, head of the Canadian Committee to Protect Journalists. "but the war in the former Yugoslavia is by far the worst we've ever seen." Mirsada Saki-Hatibovic, a reporter with Bosnia-Herzegovina Radio and TV, says she is "number three on a journalists death list drawn up by Serbian forces." Last December, she fled to Paris, where she described the terrible conditions

To the Rescue

by Nicolas Michaux

In ex-Yugoslavia, journalists have become prime targets, and their newspapers, radio and television stations crippled...



The offices of the Sarajevo daily, Oslobodjenje (Photo: SYGMA)

at the station. The building was bombed night and day and the journalists were broadcasting from the basement, she said. "There are few phones, no heating, very little food, no water, no mains electricity, or fuel for the generator. Mobile phones have been seized by the Serbs and there are no flask jackets, vehicles or usable video cameras. Staff are forced to film with very heavy old-fashioned cameras which make moving around even more dangerous."

Some 1,800 of the 2,500 employees, including all senior staff have left. Much of the equipment has been taken by Serbs. "Now there is a staff of 47 Muslims, 35 Serbs, 25 Croats and 30 others, but they all call themselves Bosnians," she says. "At the top of the Serbs death list is Goran Milic, a Serb very popular on Belgrade television who has joined the

might seem rather scattered, but they aim to meet most urgent needs first.

"SOS Media"

A round table on the independent press, for example, held in Ljubljana last February, established the coordination Centre for Independent Media in the Balkans. It began operating in April, monitoring attacks on press freedom, defending rights and promoting journalistic exchanges in the region. An appeal has been launched for support for the threatened Bosnian media and European and Canadian TV stations have agreed to show a film-clip, "SOS-Media", to rouse public opinion and raise money. Finnish television donated some children's programmes. "The children of Sarajevo haven't been outside their homes for the past year," says Schmitter. "The local TV has education programmes but it's had to repeat them over and over again." German stations have given four cameras and flask-jackets have been offered by a professional association.

The aid still has to get to Sarajevo however. UNESCO has already managed to get equipment to the radio and television and to Oslobodjenje, along with some newsprint. Working with the Fondation de France humanitarian organization, it has also given a grant to produce a newspaper for Bosnian refugees. UNESCO is also helping the press in other republics. A newspaper in Macedonia is getting help with training. The Organization has told the Croats of its concern for the free press in that country. And it has suggested to the United Nations that communication should be included on the list of exemptions to the embargo to help keep what remains of the independent press in Belgrade, alive.

nation, oppression, torture and arbitrary killings?

Milestones

So it is very fitting that the UNESCO plays such an important role in the promotion of freedom of expression and press freedom, which are part of a culture in the large and noble sense of the word. The Declaration of Windhoek (May 3, 1991) and the Declaration of Alma Ata (October 9, 1992), adopted at conferences organized by UNESCO and UNDP, and cosponsored by the International Federations of Journalists and of Newspaper Publishers (IFJ and FIEJ), are truly milestones in the struggle for free, independent and pluralistic print and broadcast media in all regions.

To go on spreading this "culture of press freedom" is one of the very important things UNESCO can and should do.

It has been a very important step that UNESCO, which, as all UN organisations, is an "organisation of governments", has come out so strongly on the importance of strong, independent media. While a free market is not enough to guarantee the quality of the media, it is certainly a condition for that quality. As has been said long ago: "A free press can be either good or bad, a controlled press can only be bad".

On the practical side, UNESCO can do much to help. One of the main fields is helping independent journalists, editors and publishers with access to training and necessary technical infrastructure. The UNESCO partnership with the IFJ and FIEJ, to do just that, is a practical way of realising the objectives of the Windhoek and Alma Ata Declarations, at a time when journalists and independent media organisations are crying out for practical and concrete activity.

Under Director-General, Federico Mayor, UNESCO has shown its commitment to freedom of expression and press freedom by declaring May 3, International Press Freedom Day. This is a welcome yearly reminder that freedom of opinion and expression, freedom of the press, are part and parcel of the essential human rights, as is stated in Article 19 of the Human Rights Declaration.

Two centuries ago, the Irish statesman John Philpot Curran wrote: "The condition upon which God has given liberty to man is eternal vigilance". That remains as valid as ever. A free press and free media, which can ask the right questions so that the right answers can be found, are part of that human privilege of liberty and of the duty of eternal vigilance.

The writer is former President of the International Federation of Journalists (1986-1992), Diplomatic Editor of 'De Standaard'.

Courtesy: UNESCO Sources

See also page 10