



WORLD AFFAIRS COUNCIL

WASHINGTON, DC

Understanding Freedom of the Press in the 21st Century

A look into the recent events in Paris with Dr. Karin Karlekar¹

Date: January 28, 2015

Time: 2:00-3:00 PM EST (Q&A 2:30-3:00 PM EST)

[Link to Webinar](#)

Defining Freedom of the Press

Freedom of the press may be widely defined as the right to generate and publish printed materials without governmental restriction/censorship. Though printed material remains subject to laws of libel and sedition, governmental interference on the basis of controversial content is prohibited. Both freedom of the press and freedom of speech (the right to express ideas or beliefs without unreasonable governmental censorship) are protected by the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. With regards to legal practice, the First Amendment is designed to protect publishers from governmental restraints on their materials prior to publication. The Supreme Court has historically indicated that a prior restraint may be valid for a publication if it contains unreasonably obscene content, poses a significant threat to national security, and/or incites violence against the government.

Freedom of the Press: A Global Perspective

An independent and free press is a core component of a healthy and functional democracy. A democratic government that is accountable to its citizens is committed to the protection of publication freedoms. Generally speaking, the protection of these rights encourages better governance and economic development. Additionally, a press that is free from censorship is more likely to stimulate consciousness and civic engagement within the public. Freedom House is one of many independent watchdog organizations that aim to cultivate and protect media-related freedoms at an international scale. A core component of Freedom House's work is its *Freedom of the Press* index. This index is developed from annual surveys of media independence in nearly 200 countries/territories. The index suggests that only fourteen percent of citizens worldwide live in nations that consistently promote and protect a free press. Outside of this small minority, many governments and non-state actors (corporations, armed groups, etc.) repress independent voices and publishers that aim to promote political reform and social change. It follows that the creation and maintenance of a free press is of particular importance to democratic transitions in post-conflict settings.

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Why Now? An Evolving, Media-Centric Dialogue

Since the Charlie Hebdo shootings on January 7, 2015, media outlets across the world have engaged in renewed conversation around freedom of the press and related freedoms of expression. Millions of French demonstrators took to the streets after the attacks to demand stronger protections for journalists and political cartoonists. Solidarity marches took place in numerous locations around the world, including London, Brussels, Jerusalem, Moscow, Ramallah, and Montreal. While many voices within the media have focused nearly exclusively on rights and terrorism/counter-terrorism, others have expanded the conversation to include critiques of French governance and advocate for increased multicultural and interfaith dialogue. More broadly speaking, the faces of media and journalism have radically transformed over the past two decades. Investigative journalism and social media have become key tools to human rights advocacy and social movements around the globe. As the notions of conflict and communications change in our increasingly globalized world, the ways in which we talk about and address these issues seem to be evolving just as rapidly.

Sources/Further Reading

“Acts of Journalism: Defining Press Freedom in the Digital Age” by Josh Stearns.

http://www.freepress.net/sites/default/files/resources/Acts_of_Journalism_October_2013.pdf

“‘Circus of Hypocrisy’: Jeremy Scahill on How World Leaders at Paris March Oppose Press Freedom” by Democracy Now.

http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/12/circus_of_hypocrisy_jeremy_scahill_on

“Freedom of the Press in the Twenty-First Century: An Agenda for Thought and Action” by Theodore L. Glasser and Timothy W. Gleason.

http://www.aejmc.org/home/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/AEJMC_Summit_Report.pdf

“‘The Other Charlies’: In Wake of Charlie Hebdo, Spotlight Grows on Press Freedom Attacks Worldwide” by Democracy Now.

http://www.democracynow.org/blog/2015/1/13/the_other_charlies_in_wake_of

“2014 Freedom of the Press Data” by Freedom House.

<https://freedomhouse.org/report-types/freedom-press#.VMZMwkfF9u0>