

Herald INTERNATIONAL Tribune

PUBLISHED WITH THE NEW YORK TIMES AND THE WASHINGTON POST

Editorials & Opinions - Friday, April 26, 2002

There is Good News on Press Freedom

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Last year, 37 journalists were killed because of their work, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, up from 24 in 2000. Most were reporting on sensitive subjects like official crime and corruption. In Iran, dozens of newspapers have been banned and their editors thrown in jail. In Zimbabwe, journalists have been beaten and a repressive new media law forced through. In Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, independent television stations have been suppressed; just this month in Armenia the only two independent broadcasters in the capital were prevented from renewing their licenses. In China, the government selectively censors Web sites that challenge the official version of events; and in Russia the government effectively silenced the main sources of independent national TV news not once but twice.

Amid all the gloom, however, there is good news to report about freedom of the press today. The profound changes wrought by globalization and the information revolution are providing citizens with greater access to information than ever before. New media technologies are making borders more and more irrelevant. Satellites, cellular phones, faxes and the Internet allow information to seep in even as governments try to keep it out. Take the Internet. Although repressive regimes try to limit providers and users, more and more governments are confronted with a Hobson's choice between controlling information and joining the world marketplace. Many have opted to take their chances with the Internet as a gateway to the global economy. The result is greater freedom of the press. In China, for example, despite continued restrictions on Internet sites, usage has soared. The same can be said about India, where there is exponential growth in Internet use despite government controls.

Beyond the Internet, we can celebrate the expansion of independent television and radio broadcasting in formerly closed societies, empowering citizens and fostering

democratic change. In the Balkans, independent radio and television stations played critical roles in the revolution that unseated Slobodan Milosevic. In the Czech Republic, 100,000 people marched recently to protest one party's attempt to politicize the national news. In Georgia, citizens took to the street in October to demand that an enterprising television station, Rustavi-2, remain on the air after government officials tried to shut it down.

Thousands of independent radio and television stations grew up in the late 1980s in the waning days of the Soviet empire; and despite ongoing challenges to freedom of the press, they remain a vibrant force for democratization. There are, of course, large areas of the world where open media have yet to take hold.

Throughout Africa, independent media are the target of government crackdowns, such as in Zimbabwe where newspaper and radio journalists are routinely beaten and harassed. But there are bright spots like Rwanda, where video documentaries recently shown in villages and prisons have opened a public dialogue about war crimes, and in Nigeria, where new private radio stations have just been licensed.

One major area in desperate need of independent media is the Arab and Muslim world. It is no coincidence that the countries with the worst records on freedom of the press are the same countries where terrorism has taken root. U.S.-backed repressive regimes from Saudi Arabia to Indonesia have encouraged state-controlled media which provide governments with a safety valve through which to redirect anger from local social and political failures.

Yet even against this backdrop of media repression, there are hopeful signs in the Arab and Muslim world. Pressure from satellite stations and foreign media is forcing many

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