



Testimony of

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Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
Hearing on Threats to Worldwide Media Freedom

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Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify before the Commission today and provide my thoughts on current threats to media freedom around the world. I would like to share brief observations on the issue, drawing primarily on the data and analysis contained in Freedom House's most recent *Freedom of the Press* report, and will then conclude with some thoughts on the implications of these findings for the policy and media development communities.

Our *Freedom of the Press* index, which has been produced since 1980, rates each country on a numerical scale based on a set of methodology questions that seek to measure the entire enabling environment for media freedom, as well as categorizing them as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free. The report has for the past 8 years shown annual declines in the level of media freedom, a phenomenon that has affected practically every region in the world.

In contrast, the latest edition, which covered the calendar year of 2011, showed a potential reversal of this trend, with gains seen in a number of countries. Unsurprisingly, the most dramatic gains occurred in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa that had previously been among the world's most repressive before longtime dictators were removed after successful popular uprisings—Libya and Tunisia.

Nevertheless, these gains remain precarious, with important setbacks to democratic prospects occurring toward year's end and into 2012 as the revolutions have faltered. Elsewhere in the Middle East, continued civil strife has led to increasingly severe restrictions on freedom of expression in Bahrain and Syria.

At the same time, press freedom continued to face obstacles and reversals in many parts of the world. China, which boasts the world's most sophisticated system of media repression, stepped up its drive to control both old and new sources of news and information through arrests and censorship. Other influential authoritarian powers—such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela—resorted to a variety of techniques to maintain a tight grip on the media, detaining some press critics, closing down media outlets and blogs, and bringing libel or defamation suits against journalists. These states were also notable for their attempts to restrict media freedom and influence the news agenda beyond their borders.

Another disturbing trend identified by Freedom House in recent years is the decline in media freedom in a number of well-established democracies. As a result of status downgrades in a number of previously Free countries over the past few years—including Hungary, South Africa, and South Korea—the proportion of the global population that enjoys a fully Free press has fallen to its lowest level in over a decade. Currently, only 14.5 percent of the world's people—or roughly one in six—live in countries where coverage of political news is robust, the safety of journalists is guaranteed, state intrusion in media affairs is minimal, and the press is not subject to onerous legal or economic pressures.

Overall, of the 197 countries and territories assessed during 2011, including the new country of South Sudan, a total of 66 (33.5 percent) were rated Free, 72 (36.5 percent) were rated Partly Free, and 59 (30 percent) were rated Not Free.

Key Threats to Media Freedom

Here, I'd like to highlight several ongoing issues, regions, and countries of concern.

- **Many governments appear unwilling to reform or eliminate the array of laws used to punish journalists and news outlets, and some have been applying them with greater determination.** Both governments and private individuals continue to restrict media freedom through the broad or disproportionate application of laws that forbid “inciting hatred,” commenting on sensitive topics such as religion or ethnicity, or “endangering national security.” Libel and defamation laws are also commonly used to muzzle the independent media. For example, Turkey has one of the largest numbers of jailed journalists worldwide, as critics are jailed under anti-terrorism and insult laws.
- **The misuse of licensing and regulatory frameworks has emerged as a key method of media control in a number of semidemocratic and authoritarian settings.** Authoritarian regimes have increasingly used bogus legalistic maneuvers to narrow the space for independent broadcasting, effectively countering an earlier trend of growth in the number of private radio and television outlets. Broadcast media are key because in many countries, they reach the largest audience. In Venezuela, for example, the denial or suspension of broadcast licenses or closure of outlets on spurious grounds have become essential methods for suppressing unwelcome views.
- **Control over new means of news dissemination, particularly internet-based social media, has become a priority for authoritarian governments.** As media delivery systems have expanded from traditional print formats and terrestrial broadcasting to satellite television, the internet, and mobile telephones, authoritarian governments have intensified efforts to exert control over the new means of communication as well as the news outlets that employ them. Efforts to block trans-national news became particularly common during and following the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, when the power of these media to effect political change became even more apparent. Among other cases, authoritarian governments employed techniques ranging from information blackouts in the state media, as in Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, to sophisticated internet and text-message filtering, as in China.
- **Worsening violence against the press is forcing journalists into self-censorship or exile, while continuing impunity for such crimes encourages new attacks.** The level of violence and physical harassment directed at the press by both official and nonstate actors remains a key concern in a number of countries. Countries with high murder rates are not necessarily those with the world’s most repressive media environments, but are generally places where private or independent voices do exist and some journalists are willing to pursue potentially dangerous stories. In media environments ranging from conflict zones to struggling democracies with a weak rule of law, the press is facing increased intimidation or outright attacks. These attacks have a chilling effect on the profession, encouraging self-censorship or exile, and the failure to punish or even seriously investigate crimes against journalists has reached scandalous proportions.

- **Fragile Freedoms in Latin America:** While many regions have seen mixed trends over the past few years, Freedom House is particularly concerned about Latin America, as this region has seen the most sustained declines over the past 5 years. While some countries, such as Mexico and Honduras, have been plagued by violence by criminal groups and nonstate actors, in others journalists are targeted by governments that are openly hostile to media criticism, as is the case in Argentina, Bolivia, and Venezuela. In particular, I'd like to highlight significant backsliding in Ecuador over the past few years.

Key countries of concern—due their size as well as their influence beyond their own borders—are Russia and China.

- The media environment in **Russia**—which ranked at 172nd place out of 197 countries worldwide—is characterized by the use of a pliant judiciary to prosecute independent journalists, impunity for the physical harassment and murder of journalists, and continued state control or influence over almost all traditional media outlets. While the relatively unfettered internet, social media, and satellite television are increasingly used to disseminate and access news and information, as was seen particularly during the December 2011 parliamentary elections and subsequent protests, new media users have yet to achieve a real breakthrough in reaching the general public in Russia, and face an uphill battle against a range of political, economic, legal, and extralegal tools at the disposal of the authorities. In the coming weeks, several bills likely to become law—including provisions that would place further curbs on the internet, under the guise of banning “harmful” content, as well as the re-criminalization of libel—will further curb freedom of expression in Russia.
- In **China**, the world's largest poor performer, ranked at 187th place of 197 countries worldwide, the authorities employ a robust system of censorship and control over both traditional and new media to curb coverage of sensitive domestic issues—including political developments as well as topics related to public health and the environment that affect millions of Chinese citizens—as well as foreign news considered to be a threat to stability, such as the Arab Spring uprisings. In 2011, dozens of writers and activists with significant internet followings were forcibly disappeared, abused in custody, and in some cases sentenced to long prison terms after anonymous messages that circulated online in February called for a Tunisian-style revolution in China. However, I would add that on the positive side, despite the robust censorship apparatus, Chinese journalists and millions of internet users continued to test the limits of permissible expression by drawing attention to incipient scandals or launching campaigns via domestic microblogging platforms. China's influence can also be felt far away from its borders, as the government extends its reach over the global media environment through the placement of Chinese-produced news on channels in Africa—recently, for example, an agreement provided for CCTV news to be shown on state-run television in Zimbabwe. Attempts at censoring news by independent outlets aimed at Chinese audiences are also regularly seen throughout Asia.

I hope that these remarks have given a flavor of just some of the varied threats faced by independent media worldwide. For more details or information, please contact us at Freedom House.

In terms of responding to these threats, we would advocate for continued efforts in the following areas:

- Ongoing diplomatic engagement by all branches of the United States government to raise concerns regarding press freedom violations as and when they occur.
- Sustained funding to be devoted to equipping local journalists and press freedom advocacy organizations to better respond to these threats—be it through training in investigative reporting, cyber- and physical security, or effective monitoring and advocacy techniques.
- Continued efforts to be devoted to advocating for systemic legal and regulatory reform, to create a positive enabling environment for independent media to be able to operate freely and without fear of repercussions.

Given the importance of media freedom as a fundamental component of a strong democracy, as well as a lead indicator of the health of the democratic system in general, United States government support is essential to help protect this threatened right in a variety of settings around the world. We have found that a combination of international pressure, coupled with efforts by local advocates, to promote media freedom can create the necessary dynamics that can lead to positive reform.

Again, thank you again for this invitation and opportunity to share these observations.