



The 2009 Release of the Survey of Freedom of the Press
Remarks by
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Thanks to Joe Urschel, the Newseum, and the Freedom Forum, especially to Susan Bennett and Charles Overby who have been steadfast supporters of our press freedom work for years. And also I want to take the opportunity to thank the Ottaway Foundation, Bob Miller and the Hurford Foundation, the Knight Foundation and the National Endowment for Democracy, and all the others who have made our press freedom survey possible today.

Freedom House was founded almost seven decades ago with a single mission – to expand freedom both in the U.S. and abroad. That mission – and the importance of that mission – continues to this day.

Freedom is not a Republican invention, nor a Democratic one, and it not a Western concept. It is a universal human aspiration. Public opinion surveys around the world have made it clear – every person, no matter where they live, want to live in freedom, they want to be able to lead their lives free from excessive interference and domination by others. They want to live a life of dignity.

It is also clear that the ability to speak freely -- without fear of retaliation -- is universally desired – across religions, regions and cultures. It is one of the most cherished freedoms. The ability of citizens to make informed choices depends on the free flow of information within a society. Freedom of expression and the free flow of information are at the heart of democracy. They are at the heart of any effective and functioning society. The free flow of information helps to keep powerful actors in check, to hold both governments and businesses accountable, to make their decision-making more transparent.

That is why President Franklin Roosevelt proclaimed that freedom of expression was the first of our Four Freedoms. It is what is inscribed on the wall of this magnificent building.

That is why Freedom House, under the wise leadership of Leonard Sussman, its long-serving Executive Director, decided in 1980 that we should focus entirely on Freedom of the Press. This survey analyzes the state of press freedom according to 3 key categories: the legal environment; political influences; and economic pressures.

The analysis is designed to raise awareness of the trends in freedom of expression, to encourage advocacy for more freedom of expression, and to motivate all of us to take action to preserve and expand freedom of expression.

What you will hear today is that press freedom has been on the decline for 7 years now, and those declines are in every region of the world. Declines have been registered in different types of regimes – from established democracies, to partly free countries, to the most repressive regimes who have continued to tighten their grip in a futile attempt to control increasingly globalized information flows.

We are concerned about the pressures on freedom of expression in many countries in the world. Those pressures include:

- restrictions on traditional media – including horrific attacks on the courageous journalists who are seeking the truth;
- growing restrictions on new media – including internet and mobile phone technology, areas in which we had seen gains in the past;
- use of vague laws that forbid press that might be “inciting hatred” on sensitive topics like religion or ethnicity;
- limiting expression and press coverage under the guise of national security;
- the misuse of libel laws to encourage self-censorship;
- and the implications of the current economic crisis, including the impact on an already beleaguered press industry

As part of the international community, as citizens of a society that is not perfect -- but by and large respects and fosters press freedom -- we have an obligation to not only be aware of these disturbing trends, but to take action.

I know that the Obama Administration is searching after the first 100 days for how to put their stamp on the bipartisan American commitment to supporting democracy, human rights and freedom around the world. I urge them to focus on this disturbing trend, and to ensure that they have a strategy that focuses on how to defend and advance freedom of expression.

It is my pleasure now to introduce Karin Karlekar, our managing editor of our Freedom of the Press survey who will talk about our current findings.