

The IFEX Clearing House - Activities and Co-operation with the OSCE

Working Together towards Freedom of Expression

Freedom of expression has gained many champions in this decade, many of them non-governmental organizations set up specifically to fight for media freedom, such as those who belong to the International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX). But there have also been steps taken to protect free expression by intra-governmental organizations such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) or the United Nations. Only in this decade have official representatives to protect freedom of expression been appointed, some on a regional basis, such as the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media and the Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Expression of the Organization of American States (OAS), appointed only last year. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression was also appointed in the 1990s. Similarly, IFEX was created in 1992 to unify the work of the world's freedom of expression organizations. The freedom of expression community has grown by leaps and bounds, and grown closer.

IFEX is a coalition of around 40 groups world-wide dedicated to promoting free expression and protecting the rights of journalists and writers.¹ IFEX has

¹ As of 1999, IFEX members were: Alliance of Independent Journalists, Jakarta; ARTICLE 19, London; Association of Independent Electronic Media, Belgrade; Canadian Journalists for Free Expression, Toronto; Committee to Protect Journalists, New York; Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, Cairo; Free Expression Ghana, Accra; Free Media Movement, Colombo; Freedom of Expression Institute, Johannesburg; Freedom House, New York; Glasnost Defence Foundation, Moscow; Greek Helsinki Monitor, Kifisia; Hong Kong Journalists Association; Human Rights Watch; Index on Censorship, London; Institute for the Studies on Free Flow of Information, Jakarta; Instituto Prensa y Sociedad, Lima; Independent Journalism Centre, Lagos; Inter American Press Association, Miami; International Federation of Journalists, Brussels; International Federation of Newspaper Publishers, Paris; International Press Institute, Vienna; Journalists Safety Service, Amsterdam; Media Institute of Southern Africa, Windhoek; Media Watch, Dhaka; Network for the Defence of Independent Media in Africa, Nairobi; Norwegian Forum for Freedom of Expression, Oslo; Pacific Islands News Association, Fiji; Pakistan Press Foundation, Karachi; Paraguay Union of Journalists, Asunción; Periodistas, Buenos Aires; Press Freedom Committee of the Guatemalan Journalists' Association, Guatemala City; Reporters Association of Thailand, Bangkok; Reporters sans frontières, Paris; West African Journalists' Association, Accra, Dakar; World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters, Montreal; World Press Freedom Committee, Reston, Virginia; Writers in Prison Committee of International PEN, London; PEN American Center; PEN Canada. For more information, contact the IFEX Clearing House at: 489 College St. #405, Toronto, Ontario/Canada M6G 1A5, Tel: +1 416 515 9622; Fax: +1 416 515 7879; E-mail: ifex@ifex.org; WWW site: www.ifex.org

members in every region of the world, taking action on free expression violations wherever they occur. Members come from countries as diverse as Egypt to Argentina to Russia to Ghana to Bangladesh. Half of the IFEX members are based in eleven OSCE countries, including Austria, Belgium, Canada, France, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and the former Yugoslavia.

The work of IFEX is facilitated by the IFEX Clearing House, located in Toronto, Canada, and managed by Canadian Journalists for Free Expression (CJFE). The Clearing House helps co-ordinate the work of IFEX members, reducing overlap among their activities and making us more effective in our shared objectives. We also work with many, many subscribers around the world, including concerned individuals, other non-governmental organizations, and offices such as that of Freimut Duve, the Representative on Freedom of the Media of the OSCE.

The idea behind IFEX is that by sharing information we can target violators of free expression more efficiently and can illuminate abuses taking place even in the smallest villages or the remotest corners of the world. While there are many cases where the perpetrators are deaf to appeals, IFEX and its members have seen evidence that its appeals have worked - from a court case in Peru to the jail cells of Nigeria. We have received thanks for helping journalists by issuing appeals in their favour and encouraging hundreds of others to do so world-wide.

IFEX has the ability to respond instantly to an emergency situation. On a daily basis, the Clearing House receives information from our members by electronic mail which is edited into an alert and then sent out quickly to members and subscribers world-wide over the IFEX Action Alert Network (AAN). IFEX has over 700 e-mail subscribers and thousands more visit the IFEX Internet Service at www.ifex.org where the alerts are posted.

The ability to send and receive information electronically means that the response time has decreased and efficiency has increased. It gives people in regions with poor telecommunications services access to the world. Those without access to the Internet can receive a weekly IFEX report by mail.

IFEX members initiate action alerts in response to cases where journalists, writers or media workers are attacked, detained, kidnapped, threatened or murdered; involving censorship or the banning of publications; targeting media laws which violate internationally-accepted standards; involving criminal cases launched against journalists, writers or publishers; and many other cases. Some members focus more on attacks against journalists, others on media laws, and others on broader violations against freedom of expression.

In 1998, the IFEX Clearing House issued over 1,500 alerts. They included at least 52 journalists or writers murdered; 94 journalists or writers arrested and held for more than 48 hours; 301 journalists or writers assaulted or beaten;

34 journalists or writers threatened with death; 217 charges, sentences or legal actions; and 118 media outlets banned, suspended or closed.

The urgent reaction to attacks on media freedom is also integral to the job of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media. As outlined in the mandate for the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, created in November 1997, the person holding the position "will concentrate (...) on rapid response to serious non-compliance with OSCE principles and commitments by participating States in respect of freedom of expression and free media." In drawing up the mandate, OSCE participating States promised to "reaffirm the principles and commitments they have adhered to in the field of free media. They recall in particular that freedom of expression is a fundamental and internationally recognized human right and a basic component of a democratic society and that free, independent and pluralistic media are essential to a free and open society (...)"²

In addition to operating the AAN, the Clearing House publishes the "Communiqué", a weekly bulletin containing current free expression news, events, and awards. It is published in English, French and Spanish, and is available in print, by e-mail or via the Internet. Every year, a special World Press Freedom Day issue is published on or around 3 May, with a round-up of activities around the world. In 1999, the IFEX Internet Service also featured a special World Press Freedom Day page.

In order to address the disparity between North and South, the Clearing House runs the IFEX Outreach Programme. This initiative gives support to nascent freedom of expression organizations in the developing world, Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union. IFEX offers these groups technical and financial support, as well as the encouragement they need to overcome the particular hardships they face in their country. When they become members of the IFEX community, these groups are provided with a support network that they can rely on. In exchange, they disseminate important news on freedom of expression violations that might otherwise go unchecked.

Another significant effort in which members of IFEX are united in their efforts is by working together on joint actions, as they did in early April 1999 on an action protesting attacks on independent media in the former Yugoslavia. The World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC) led the joint action on 6 April to condemn the closure of Radio B92 and the increasing crackdown on independent media in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Early on 2 April, Yugoslav police officers sealed the offices of Radio B92 and ordered all staff to cease work on the premises immediately. A court official who accompanied the police told station manager Saša Mir-

2 Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, Permanent Council, 137th Plenary Meeting, PC Journal No. 137, Agenda item 1, Decision No. 193, PC.DEC/193, 5 November 1997, p. 1.

ković that he had been dismissed and replaced by Aleksandar Nikačević, a member of President Slobodan Milošević's ruling Socialist Party of Serbia, according to the joint statement "thus bringing Radio B92 under effective government control". The move came a little more than a week after the start of bombing in Serbia and Kosovo by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). According to the statement "Radio B92, the leading independent radio station in the region, has been the main source of alternative information in and from Serbia since the beginning of NATO air strikes".

AMARC was joined by diverse groups including CJFE, Freedom House, Greek Helsinki Monitor, the Institute for Studies on Free Flow of Information in Indonesia, the International Press Institute, the Pakistan Press Foundation and the World Association of Newspapers. It is apparent that groups in countries far away from the conflict can support their colleagues at times of need, even when they have no direct interest other than the preservation of free expression.

The Association of Independent Electronic Media (ANEM) was voted in as a new member of IFEX in February 1999, just before the crisis in Kosovo flared up dramatically. It was a timely move which allowed information coming directly from the source in the region to be circulated on the IFEX Action Alert Network. IFEX members responded by showing their solidarity with the beleaguered group.

The Balkans has been a trouble spot for much of this decade for freedom of expression violations, among other human rights abuses. Monitors such as the IFEX Clearing House and the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media have taken note of the many abuses in the region. In September 1998, Duve was appointed Chairman of the Council of the Independent Media Commission in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which "has as its current priority the creation of a media environment conducive to the promotion of an open and pluralistic democratic society". On 6 October 1998, Duve reminded Serbian authorities that threats to independent media for broadcasting foreign-produced programmes "are in contravention with the principles and commitments of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe signed by Yugoslavia in 1975". Also in October 1998, in a somewhat prescient statement, Duve urged Serbian authorities "to provide immediate and unimpeded access for national and international media to the conflict-ridden region of Kosovo". This is one example where our work has produced similar results.

The IFEX Clearing House has also circulated alerts on attacks against the independent media in Belarus. In turn, the OSCE has responded to this repression. In February 1999, in an address to the OSCE Permanent Council, David Johnson, United States Ambassador to the OSCE, appealed to the Belarusian government to allow the media to report freely on plans by the opposition to

hold May elections, and condemned the crackdown on the independent media which is enforced through laws against the media.

IFEX members have also united over the years in joint actions to support democracy and the independent media in Nigeria; to call on Chinese authorities to preserve free expression in Hong Kong when it was transferred to their control; and to call for free expression in countries from Algeria to Peru. As a united voice, IFEX can come together to appeal to governments and others who are guilty of violating Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees that "everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression".

Every year, IFEX members join together at an annual meeting, where they come up with strategies for the coming year. Joint statements emerge from these meetings as a response to current crises. In 1999, the IFEX meeting was held in South Africa, taking place in Africa for the first time. IFEX members used the opportunity to discuss media in times of crisis, repressive media laws, the development of a media alliance in Southeast Asia, media freedom in the Middle East and North Africa, the current situation in Yugoslavia, the crackdown on the independent media in Zimbabwe, the state of the media in Nigeria, and a number of other topics specific to Africa.

IFEX functions at its best as a network of networks. Many of our members are networks, such as the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), the West African Journalists' Association (WAJA), the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) and the Inter American Press Association (IAPA).

Likewise, OSCE is a network of countries. The OSCE Secretariat has been a subscriber of IFEX for a number of years. The IFEX Clearing House has been the recipient of information from that office since its creation, when the OSCE was still known as the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe. We have also shared information with the office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media since its mandate was created. Through increased co-operation with this new office which caters to our field, we have increased the flow of information substantially.

In October 1998, I had the opportunity to meet with Freimut Duve when he visited Canada. He explained that it was imperative that the position of the Representative on Freedom of the Media had been created, because he felt that media freedom was of the utmost importance to democracy. That sums up the essence of the mandate of IFEX: that freedom of expression is integral to freedom itself, and we must struggle to protect it.