

The New UNESCO: A Partner for Press Freedom

Address

by

Leonard H. Marks

at the

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Paris

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The New UNESCO: A Partner for Press Freedom

By Leonard H. Marks

I appear here today on behalf of the World Press Freedom Committee, a global umbrella organization with 34 journalistic member groups on five continents. It includes all categories of journalists – both labor and management in print and broadcasting media. Our organization is well-known to UNESCO. We have been active observers of its major deliberations since our foundation nearly twenty years ago in response to the challenge to press freedom posed by the New World Information and Communication Order initiative centered in UNESCO. That authoritarian New Order espoused press controls that amounted to international censorship. It was our considered judgment then that that policy had turned UNESCO into an adversary of press freedom, even though the mandate of its constitution – to advance the free flow of information in the world by word and image – was just the opposite of that press control effort.

The World Press Freedom Committee was obliged then to say that UNESCO had gone far astray when it came to free speech and freedom of the press. We did not ask the United States and Britain, or any other country, to quit the organization, but the analysis we made of UNESCO's Communication Program played a central role in the decisions of those governments, given their historic devotion to press freedom.

If that was indeed the central reason for the American and British departures a decade ago, I am obliged now to say that that reason is no longer valid and has not been for some time. We must be just as forthright now as we were then. I now think those countries belong back in UNESCO. I think this not because I have changed my views, but because UNESCO has changed its views.

Although I do not speak for the United States or any other government, I believe that the Clinton Administration would recognize that the United States should rejoin UNESCO if budgetary constraints at home are overcome. I am absolutely convinced that the obstacles to a U.S. return to these halls are practical ones, not matters of principle. The United States and Great Britain belong back here as soon as it becomes possible.

I will not say that everything is perfect today and that language echoing the New World Information Order never creeps back into some official documents here. But, under Director General Mayor and his able team in the Communication Sector, UNESCO has become what it was intended to be from the start – a partner in the ongoing world struggle for press freedom.

* * *

UNESCO general conferences used to be full of rhetoric condemning the media. Now, such talk is the exception. From the start, Mr. Mayor placed his words on the side of press freedom. When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, we of the World Press Freedom Committee and other free press groups challenged him to show that he really meant those words. We asked him to invite newly free journalists of Eastern Europe emerging from the underground to come here to UNESCO headquarters in Paris to meet with

their colleagues from the West to discuss the help they needed to reinforce their newfound liberty. Not only did Mr. Mayor accept that challenge, but that first East-West free journalists meeting in February 1990 led directly to a series of similar regional meetings of African, Asian and Latin American journalists that adopted the broad press freedom principles embodied in the Declarations of Windhoek, Almaty and Santiago de Chile.

Those statements were welcome reaffirmations of the press freedom principles set forth in 1987 by journalists from 34 countries in the 10-point Charter for a Free Press that has become a touchstone document enjoining governments to avoid all forms of censorship and press controls, direct and indirect. As its first sentence says, "A free press means a free people." It has been widely endorsed, and the first leader of a U.N. agency to do so was Federico Mayor, followed this year by U.N. Secretary General Boutros Boutros Ghali.

To commemorate the Declaration of Windhoek on May 3, 1991, UNESCO declared an annual World Press Freedom Day. Its importance has grown with every passing year. And, out of the public eye, we know, Mr. Mayor regularly works for the release of imprisoned journalists. The Director General of UNESCO has passed the test of attachment to press freedom with flying colors. Mr. Director General, we salute you as a champion of the free press.

What better symbol could there be of the sea change at UNESCO than your choice here this year as President for this General Conference of a notable free newspaperman, Torben Krogh of Denmark. Under his distinguished leadership, UNESCO's International Program for the Development of Communication established as its goal that at least half of all of its projects will be for independent media, and it has made noteworthy strides toward putting that into practice. Mr. President, the free press is honored by your election to head this illustrious forum.

* * *

UNESCO's founding generation clearly meant for it to uphold and promote Article 19 of the U.N.'s Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaimed in 1948 that: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."

Note that first word – "Everyone." It means that free speech and press freedom are literally for everyone – not just governments or power elites or the intelligentsia or communicators. Note also that last phrase – "regardless of frontiers." It means that freedom of expression is the keystone of democracy everywhere, not just in a select group of advanced industrial democracies.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration was a recognition that there cannot be a free society without a free press. It clearly implies also that there cannot be a free economy without a free press. They are all inextricably interconnected. The current trends toward privatization, decentralization and diversification of economies in the countries emerging from totalitarianism are coupled with the recognition of the need for the right of the free and open discussion of economic choices and policy alternatives that are provided by the forum of free media. International business leaders are reluctant to invest where information is controlled.

The media are admittedly sometimes bothersome for governments. Few chiefs of state or heads of government welcome criticism. The media can sometimes get it wrong, even occasionally very wrong indeed. But so can governmental authorities, and with far more damaging consequences. The danger that the press may misunderstand or misinterpret or even misinform is in the final analysis a small price to

pay compared to the services the news media render when they expose wrongdoing or gross errors of judgment by the powers that be.

Nobody advocates that the press should behave irresponsibly or place itself above the laws set forth for everyone. But it should not be for governments to dictate to the press what its responsibilities are. The first responsibility of news media is to its audience, and in a free country that audience is the ultimate and most effective judge of the fate of the press, simply by not buying the newspapers, not turning on the radio or not watching television – through the individual decisions of members of the public. If the press wants to set rules for itself, that should be its free choice, made without outside pressure.

Most of you will recall that Thomas Jefferson, one of the most important U.S. Founding Fathers, went so far as to say that, given the choice between the existence of a free press and a government, he would choose the press. That is perhaps an extreme position, but it shows how deeply rooted press freedom was in the 18th Century Enlightenment values of the American Revolution.

* * *

Yet, that great principle is still far from secure in practice in the world at large. In many parts of the world, press freedom is now enshrined in constitutions. But it is as often as not hemmed in by restrictions that gut such expressions of any real meaning.

This is not academic or abstract. Prime examples are the widespread laws against “insulting” presidents or other top officials regularly used to jail journalists who dare criticize their governments’ leaders. I visited an Asian country with a similar law against spreading “false information” about the leaders and other matters. I asked the Attorney General to tell me who decides what reports are false. His answer was candid, chilling and had no unnecessary frills. “I will decide that,” he said. That is the legal framework for tyranny.

The careful documentation of the Committee to Protect Journalists in New York showed that 174 journalists were in prison on Jan. 1 of this year for their exercise of press freedom. Some have been released. But more have been imprisoned. As if that were not enough, there have been 37 killings of journalists in the line of duty so far this year and 11 other cases are under investigation. The assassination of a journalist is the ultimate form of censorship.

In Algeria alone, more than 50 journalists have been murdered since the start of the civil war there in 1993, just for the “crime” of being journalists. UNESCO recently produced a very good publication called Violence, listing the cases of murdered Algerian journalists and intellectuals. In former Yugoslavia, the toll among journalists has been at least 46 in the past three years, 27 in the civil war in Tajikistan, untold dozens in Rwanda and seven killed or missing in Chechnya. But it is not only in warlike situations that journalists are targeted by parties to conflicts. They are also gunned down in peacetime by agents of authorities, fanatics or criminals because press freedom hurts wrongdoers of all kinds.

Journalism is by nature a hazardous occupation. Some well-meaning officials want to find legal ways to protect journalists. Other, less well-meaning authorities seek to use the protection of journalists as a pretext to justify controlling them. That was one of the schemes at the heart of the old New World Information Order in the bad old days here at UNESCO. The stark fact is that no legal protection system has ever been devised that could not be twisted by would-be press controllers, and that working journalists seek no special protections that are not already extended to all noncombatant civilians.

There are other obstacles, sometimes overwhelming, to press freedom practiced throughout the world, notably in emerging democracies, where old habits die hard:

- Where newsprint is in short supply, authoritarians dole it out first of all to the publications that play the governmental game.
- Printing plants are often still government monopolies, and priority access to the presses is given to friendly papers.
- Officials often still control the newsstands and other elements of distribution networks, which somehow fail to deliver critical journals.
- Authorities arrange for the bulk of advertising by publicly owned industries to go to their cronies, starving the independent press where advertising markets are narrow.
- Tax structures and subsidy systems are rigged in favor of pro-government media.
- In few of the emerging democracies have governments surrendered their monopolies over broadcasting, especially television.

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Mr. President, all such governmental obstacles to the emergence of an independent press that should be treated evenhandedly by officialdom are clear violations of both the spirit and the letter of the Charter for a Free Press. And they must come to an end in a world where free speech and press freedom are the ground rules for democratic societies. I am not talking about a luxury for rich countries, for advanced economies, but a need of the human spirit everywhere.

The courageous men and women of the press who often put their personal safety on the line for the sake of press freedom should not have to be subjected to such systematic harassments. Their tasks are sufficiently hazardous without that.

I need not tell you, Mr. President, that in far too many countries press freedom is an endangered species and that it is already extinct in some.

If we prize free societies and the benefits they promise for the citizenry – and not just the material benefits – then the friends of free media, including today's UNESCO, must not lose heart in their ongoing struggle for free speech and freedom of the press.

We have given this effort our best. You at UNESCO have joined us in the fight. We have had some successes, but there is a long road ahead. Together, we can achieve much.

Thank you, Mr. President, for all that you have done. Thank you, Mr. Director General, and thank you, UNESCO, for your support of the principles of press freedom. We work together for a common cause.

Appendix A

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

November 3, 1995

Dear Director General Mayor:

It is with great pleasure that I offer my congratulations on this the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. I applaud UNESCO's unique contributions to international human rights with its emphasis on education, science and cultural exchange.

Today, the work of UNESCO plays an ever more valuable and meaningful role in shaping global peace and security. UNESCO's contributions to the free flow of information across boundaries, natural and political, are integral to the success of global democratization. It continues to play a critical role in breaking down obstacles to information sharing, enabling citizens an equal opportunity to take on the responsibilities and reap the rewards of international citizenship.

I am pleased that you have taken great strides to address the concerns and issues that led to U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO in 1984. I regret that we are unable to join the 184 nation strong membership because of the budget constraints that we currently face. However, I assure you that U.S. membership in UNESCO remains on my list of priorities for the future. I continue to explore ways to identify the necessary resources to make this wish a reality. In the meantime, I welcome efforts to engage and include members of my Administration in your activities.

On this very important anniversary, I wish to honor your long and enduring service to global peace and offer my sincerest hope that the work of UNESCO will continue long into the future.

Sincerely,

The Honorable Federico Mayor
Director General
UNESCO
7 Place de Fontenoy
75352, Paris
France

Appendix B

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^BC-UNESCO-US Comeback
^Media Group Urges US to Rejoin UNESCO<
^By PIERRE-YVES GLASS=
^Associated Press Writers

PARIS (AP) - A leader of the World Press Freedom Committee on Friday urged Washington to rejoin UNESCO, and praised the U.N. body for dropping its purported efforts to censor the news media.

At the urging of the media watchdog group, the United States withdrew its membership from UNESCO in 1984, complaining that it had become anti-Western and sought to stifle press freedom through the licensing of journalists.

Britain quit for similar reasons in 1985. The two countries' departure deprived the U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of 30 percent of its financing.

"It was our considered judgment that the (media) policy had turned UNESCO into an adversary of press freedom," Leonard Marks, treasurer and general counsel of the World Press Freedom Committee, told the U.N. body's general assembly.

In a bluntly worded speech, Marks said UNESCO's New World Information Order in the early 1980s was "authoritarian" and "amounted to international censorship."

Proponents of the New World Information Order argued that the worldwide flow of news was dominated by wealthy Western media outlets. But some of their proposals, such as licensing journalists and more government involvement in developing nations' media, were denounced in the West as censorship.

The World Press Freedom Committee, based in Reston, Va., was founded after Federico Mayor took over as UNESCO head in 1987.

"The United States belongs back here as soon as possible," Marks said, citing UNESCO's change of attitude under Mayor.

However, in a time of budget cuts, it's unlikely Washington would rejoin UNESCO soon. Its membership would require about \$50 million in annual dues.

UNESCO celebrates its 50th anniversary next week.

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A.F.P. (translation)

UNESCO-press

The World Press Freedom Committee encourages Washington and London to rejoin UNESCO

PARIS, 3 Nov. (AFP) - An organization that works for freedom of press in the world and that in the 1980s one of the fiercest critics of the new world information order advocated by UNESCO on Friday encouraged the United States and Britain to rejoin the world organization.

The president of the World Press Freedom Committee, Leonard Marks, said that UNESCO has again become "a partner in the current struggle for press freedom."

Addressing the delegates meeting in Paris for the organization's General Conference, he said he considered that the United States and Britain should rejoin UNESCO because it "has changed."

Washington and London, which invoked excessive politicization and bad management at the organization, withdrew from it, respectively on 1 Jan. 1985 and 1986. The departure of those two countries deprived UNESCO of about 30 percent of its funding.

The WPFC stresses that by supporting the new world information order, which it identifies with "international censorship," UNESCO became "an adversary of press freedom."

"If that was certainly the major reason for the departure of the United States and Britain ten years ago, I am now obliged to say that those reasons no longer exist and that this has been so for some time," Mr. Marks affirmed.

According to Mr. Marks, who was a member of the State Department's UNESCO reform observation committee from 1985 to 1986, only budgetary constraints imposed by the Congress prevent the American Administration from deciding upon the return of the United States to the world organization.

Charter for a Free Press

A free press means a free people. To this end, the following principles, basic to an unfettered flow of news and information both within and across national borders, deserve the support of all those pledged to advance and protect democratic institutions.

1. Censorship, direct or indirect, is unacceptable; thus laws and practices restricting the right of the news media freely to gather and distribute information must be abolished, and government authorities, national or local, must not interfere with the content of print or broadcast news, or restrict access to any news source.
2. Independent news media, both print and broadcast, must be allowed to emerge and operate freely in all countries.
3. There must be no discrimination by governments in their treatment, economic or otherwise, of the news media within a country. In those countries where government media also exist, the independent media must have the same free access as the official media have to all material and facilities necessary to their publishing or broadcasting operations.
4. States must not restrict access to newsprint, printing facilities and distribution systems, operation of news agencies, and availability of broadcast frequencies and facilities.
5. Legal, technical and tariff practices by communications authorities which inhibit the distribution of news and restrict the flow of information are condemned.
6. Government media must enjoy editorial independence and be open to a diversity of viewpoints. This should be affirmed in both law and practice.
7. There should be unrestricted access by the print and broadcast media within a country to outside news and information services, and the public should enjoy similar freedom to receive foreign publications and foreign broadcasts without interference.
8. National frontiers must be open to foreign journalists. Quotas must not apply, and applications for visas, press credentials and other documentation requisite for their work should be approved promptly. Foreign journalists should be allowed to travel freely within a country and have access to both official and unofficial news sources, and be allowed to import and export freely all necessary professional materials and equipment.
9. Restrictions on the free entry to the field of journalism or over its practice, through licensing or other certification procedures, must be eliminated.
10. Journalists, like all citizens, must be secure in their persons and be given full protection of law. Journalists working in war zones are recognized as civilians enjoying all rights and immunities accorded to other civilians.

About the Charter . . .

This Charter for a Free Press represents provisions approved by journalists from 34 countries at the Voices of Freedom world conference on censorship problems in London, Jan. 16-18, 1987.

The conference was held by the World Press Freedom Committee, with the cooperation of the International Federation of Newspaper Publishers (FIEJ), International Press Institute, Inter American Press Association, North American National Broadcasters Association and the International Federation of the Periodical Press.

The provisions embody a wide consensus on principles necessary to ensure free, independent news media. The Charter has been cited approvingly at OSCE and other meetings, formally endorsed by both the U.N. Secretary-General and UNESCO's Director-General and supported by a number of journalistic organizations around the world.

We hope the Charter will be useful wherever principles for freedom and a free press are needed.

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