



# COMMITTEE TO PROTECT JOURNALISTS

330 7th Avenue, 11th Fl., New York, NY 10001 USA Phone: (212) 465-1004 Fax: (212) 465-9568 Web: www.cpj.org E-Mail: info@cpj.org

---

**HONORARY CO-CHAIRMAN**

Walter Cronkite  
(1916-2009)

**HONORARY CO-CHAIRMAN**

Terry Anderson  
**CHAIRMAN**

Paul E. Steiger  
PROPUBLICA

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

Joel Simon

**DIRECTORS**

Andrew Alexander  
THE WASHINGTON POST

Franz Allina

Christiane Amanpour  
CNN

Dean Baquet

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Kathleen Carroll

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Rajiv Chandrasekaran

THE WASHINGTON POST

Sheila Coronel

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Josh Friedman

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

Anne Garrels

NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO

James C. Goodale

DEBEVOISE & PLIMPTON

Cheryl Gould

NBC NEWS

Charlayne Hunter-Gault

Gwen Ifill

PBS

Jane Kramer

THE NEW YORKER

David Laventhal

Lara Logan

CBS NEWS

Rebecca MacKinnon

David Marash

Kati Marton

Michael Massing

Geraldine Fabrikant Metz

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Victor Navasky

THE NATION

Andres Oppenheimer

THE MIAMI HERALD

Burl Osborne

FREEDOM COMMUNICATIONS

Clarence Page

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Norman Pearlstine

BLOOMBERG L.P.

Ahmed Rashid

Dan Rather

HDNET

Gene Roberts

PHILIP MERRILL COLLEGE OF JOURNALISM

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Maria Teresa Ronderos

SEMANA.COM

Sandra Mims Rowe

Diane Sawyer

ABC NEWS

David Schlesinger

REUTERS

Paul C. Tash

ST. PETERSBURG TIMES

Mark Whitaker

NBC NEWS

Brian Williams

NBC NEWS

Matthew Winkler

BLOOMBERG NEWS

**ADVISORY BOARD**

Tom Brokaw

NBC NEWS

Steven L. Isenberg

Anthony Lewis

Charles L. Overby

THE FREEDOM FORUM

Erwin Potts

John Seigenthaler

THE FREEDOM FORUM

FIRST AMENDMENT CENTER

## Testimony before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS United States House of Representatives

Submitted by Joel Simon

Executive Director

Committee to Protect Journalists

June 16, 2010

### Press Freedom in the Americas

I would like to commend Chairman Engel and the members of the House Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere for holding this important hearing and for giving the Committee to Protect Journalists the opportunity to testify before you. My name is Joel Simon, and I'm CPJ's executive director. CPJ is an independent, nonprofit organization dedicated to defending press freedom and the rights of journalists worldwide.

I originally joined CPJ in 1998 as the Americas program coordinator after working as a freelance journalist for a decade in Latin America. While my responsibilities at CPJ today are global, I retain a keen interest in Latin America and continue to follow developments in the region closely.

What I have seen during more than a decade at CPJ is that while democracy has become firmly entrenched in much of Latin America, the press continues to operate with few institutional protections. Despite the strong tradition of independent and critical media in many countries of the region, journalists are increasingly vulnerable to both government repression and violence.

A decade ago, the Latin American region was experiencing a rapid expansion of press freedom including a series of "Watergate"-style reports that rocked governments in several countries. Through their aggressive reporting on a massive corruption scheme carried out by President Fernando Collor de Mello, Brazilian journalists helped bring down a government. In Argentina, investigative journalists exposed the human rights abuses committed during the years of dictatorship and also broke story after story about corruption scandals in the administration of President Carlos Menem.

Governments in many parts of the region responded not by putting in place institutional safeguards to protect the media's watchdog role, but rather by taking note of the growing power of the media and finding new strategies to retain the upper hand.

Today, we are going to hear from witnesses from two countries, Venezuela and Nicaragua, where governments are pursuing an effective strategy marginalizing and even vilifying the media while using control of government institutions, including the judiciary, to carry out legal action against critics.

CPJ published a report last July outlining the way in which President Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua has employed these kinds of tactics. Ortega has set the tone by calling Nicaraguan journalists "sons of Goebbels." Critics have faced punitive tax raids and criminal defamation suits. The CPJ report, entitled Daniel Ortega's Media War, has been entered into the record.

Regarding Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez has employed a similar strategy, vilifying the press while using politicized administrative procedures to force critical broadcasters off the air. I would like to note that on Friday authorities ordered the arrest of Globovisión's President Guillermo Zoloaga and his son. The fact that the warrants came a week after President Chávez publicly lamented that Zuloaga remained free is alarming, especially since Globovisión has been the target of a barrage of government investigations. The decision is part of a systematic campaign of harassment of the private media that has resulted in the closure of Venezuela's main critical broadcaster, RCTV, as well as dozens of private radio stations.

While in some countries in the region journalists face government harassment, in others the problem is government neglect. Mexico is the leading example. The situation confronting the press there has become incredibly dramatic in recent years. More than 30 journalists have been killed and disappeared since President Felipe Calderón came to office in December 2006. Most of them are local reporters covering drug trafficking, crime, or corruption. Impunity for these crimes is nearly complete. Pervasive self-censorship, a devastating effect of this wave of unprecedented violence, is undermining the basic right to freedom of expression.

In October 2006, U.S. reporter Brad Will was shot and killed while covering protests in Oaxaca State. A video of the incident appears to show a man later identified as a member of a pro-government militia firing a weapon directly at Will. Despite this evidence, no one has been convicted in the killing.

CPJ is calling on the Mexican government to enact laws making it a federal offense to use violence to limit the right to freedom of expression. President Calderón told us in a meeting in June 2008 that he would support a federal approach, but so far legislation has not been enacted.

While Mexico remains the most deadly country for the press in Latin America, Honduras, where six journalists have been killed since the beginning of the year, has also been getting attention. CPJ is carrying out an investigation into these killings to determine whether there is some sort of orchestrated campaign against the media. What can be said at this point is that in both Mexico and Honduras, impunity in the killings of journalists is the norm.

In fact, impunity is a terrible threat to press freedom, not just in Latin America but on a global scale. Each year, CPJ produces a global Impunity Index, ranking the countries around the world where the killers of journalists go free. Mexico is ninth on the list. Several Latin American countries, however, have actually seen their ranking improve because they have been able to solve outstanding murder cases. By solving a case in 2009, Brazil fell below our threshold for inclusion and came off the list entirely. Colombia, while in fifth place on the list, saw its ranking improve over the last two years as violence against the press—and throughout the country—declined dramatically.

Yet, even as the violence against the press has diminished in Colombia, serious problems remain. The press is weaker financially and institutionally. President Alvaro Uribe Vélez maintained an extremely adversarial

relationship with the media throughout his administration, angrily denouncing critical journalists and at times publicly linking them to the leftist guerrillas. In March 2009, the Uribe government was caught up in a major scandal when it was revealed that the DAS, the government national intelligence agency, had been wiretapping political opponents, magistrates, human rights activists, and journalists. CPJ's own e-mails were intercepted. Several senior DAS officials were subsequently arrested. In a meeting with a CPJ delegation in February, Uribe told us that "illegal spies are enemies of Colombia."

Finally, I would like to talk about Cuba, which is far and away the most repressive environment for the press in Latin America. In fact, Cuba is one of the most repressive countries in the world in this regard. There are 22 journalists currently jailed in Cuba, which means the country ranks third behind Iran and China. There was some modest hope after Fidel Castro stepped aside in 2006 that conditions for the media would improve, but that has not happened under President Raúl Castro. Cuba has seen the emergence of an incipient blogging culture which, for now, has been tolerated. We commend President Obama for giving an e-mail interview to Cuban blogger Yoani Sánchez shortly after she was detained and beaten by Cuban security agents in November. The CPJ report, titled "Chronicling Cuba, bloggers offer fresh hope," has been entered into the record.

Efforts by the United States government to protect and promote press freedom are vital because we live in an information society. Those who are deprived of basic information are in essence marginalized. The freedom to seek and receive information is not only a human right it; is a prerequisite for full participation in the global economy.

U.S. policy should be to promote the exchange of information and ideas on a global scale, not just in Latin America. In signing into law the Daniel Pearl Press Freedom Act on May 17, President Obama said, "What this act does is it sends a strong message from the United States government and from the State Department that we are paying attention to how other governments are operating when it comes to the press." CPJ is also encouraged that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton has made the promotion of a free and open Internet a central goal of U.S. foreign policy.

A consistent and principled position in defense of press freedom and freedom of expression is rooted in U.S. history and ideals and will help build good will around the world. While maintaining this commitment on a global level, the U.S. should use the particular influence it has in Latin America to ensure that journalists in the region are able to do this job freely and safely. Those whose rights are violated should know that they will have the support of the U.S. government in seeking justice.