



Muzzling the Media

How the New Autocrats Threaten Press Freedoms

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In September 2004, Russian security forces stormed a school in the provincial town of Beslan where Chechen separatists were holding hundreds hostage. In the ensuing chaos, more than 300 people were killed, half of them children. What was a terrible tragedy for the Russian people was a triumph for the information policy of President Vladimir Putin. Previous national calamities—including the Kursk submarine disaster in 2000 and the botched 2002 raid on a Moscow theater also occupied by Chechen militants—generated a flurry of critical television coverage. But Putin faced little criticism in the aftermath of the Beslan incident. “As soon as the storming of the school was over, so was television coverage,” noted Russia analyst Masha Lipman. “There were no survivors’ accounts, no stories of desperate people who lost loved ones, no independent experts’ analysis, and no public discussion whatsoever.”¹

Putin and the Federal Security Police, successors to the KGB, had succeeded in bringing Russia’s once feisty broadcast media under Kremlin control without putting journalists in jail or using violence.² As Lipman points out, such aggressive tactics could have turned journalists into press freedom martyrs in Russia while eliciting stern condemnations from the West. Instead, the Kremlin targeted media owners, who were vulnerable because of their shady business practices and their efforts to use their media empires to influence politics. The Kremlin succeeded in installing new and compliant ownership using a mixture of litigation, aggressive enforcement of tax laws, and per-

sonal intimidation. Putin, meanwhile, cast the successive takeovers of critical broadcast networks by Kremlin supporters as “business disputes.” He even suggested, in a 2005 interview with *60 Minutes*, that the situation facing Russian broadcasters was no different from the criticism that had forced Dan Rather to step down in 2004 as anchor of the *CBS Evening News*. “We understood that he was forced to resign by his bosses at CBS,” Putin explained to his interviewer, Mike Wallace. “This is a problem of your democracy, not ours.”

A new breed of sophisticated autocrats is threatening press freedoms around the world. Like President Putin, these “democratators” stand for election, preside over the trappings of democratic government, and express rhetorical support for democratic principles. At the same time, they are deeply committed to controlling information and managing the media, which they view as a threat to their power. While a previous generation of autocratic leaders favored direct confrontation and often resorted to violence to keep the press in line, this new breed relies more on media manipulation, legal harassment, and control over the government bureaucracy to achieve the same ends.

The democratators span the ideological spectrum—from the Russian nationalism of President Putin to the messianic socialism of Venezuelan president Hugo Chávez. They also span a continuum of repression. Some, like Colombia’s popular president Alvaro Uribe, have legitimate democratic credentials and seek to marginalize and discredit

the media but do not interfere directly. Others, like Tunisian president Zine Ben Ali, are highly repressive but hide their abuses, including near complete control of the media, behind a democratic façade. Then there are the true dictators like President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and President Aleksandr Lukashenko of Belarus, who continue to hold periodic elections and maintain a veneer of legality but are not fooling anyone.

Censorship, imprisonment, and government-orchestrated assassinations of journalists have not entirely gone out of style. In Cuba, Burma, and Eritrea, dozens of journalists are in jail and the press is functionally an arm of the state.³ But in other countries where the press operates with restraints—countries as diverse as Morocco, Pakistan, and Uganda—the mechanisms of control are less visible. In these countries, the press is nominally independent, and some criticism of the government is tolerated, especially in the print media and online.

Even highly repressive countries like China increasingly employ a similar approach. Beijing tries to project an image of openness, particularly with respect to the media, and the number of media outlets in China has exploded in recent years. But there are also 32 journalists in jail in China, more than any other country in the world. While embracing the Internet as an engine for economic growth, China is challenging the once widely accepted notion that the Web is impossible to control or censor. Relying on sophisticated filtering technology—much of it supplied by U.S. companies—as well as an army of monitors, Chinese authorities believe they can continue to contain subversive online speech. If they succeed, it could have far-reaching implications for the future of the Internet in other repressive societies.

The Committee to Protect Journalists, founded in New York 25 years ago, arose in response to massive state repression in Latin

America and the total control over media behind the Iron Curtain. With a tiny staff, CPJ initially employed tactics developed by the human rights movement, i.e., campaigning around emblematic cases of imprisonment and abuse. Today, CPJ has a staff of 24 and is part of an international movement linking other global organizations like the Paris-based Reporters sans Frontières with national press freedom groups around the world. Advocating for press freedom in places where repression is less overt is more complicated and labor intensive, requiring exacting documentation, research to identify systematic violations, and extensive promotion or publicity to get the attention of the media, the diplomatic community, and the offending government. An examination of the evolution of CPJ's mission over the last quarter-century offers insight in how to respond to the emerging challenge presented by a new generation of autocrats—with some lessons for U.S. foreign policy.

Birth of a Movement

Twenty-five years ago, the American media establishment had little interest in the travails of local reporters working in repressive societies. Journalists themselves were reluctant to cover media abuses, much less advocate against them. Many believed that the public would view this as self-interested activism, and that such reporting would therefore damage the media's independence and credibility. The imprisonment of U.S. foreign correspondents overseas had sometimes sparked outrage: the 1949 killing of CBS correspondent George Polk during the Greek civil war inspired a special award for courageous reporting, and the 1951 jailing of the Prague bureau chief of the Associated Press, William N. Oatis, on espionage charges sparked an international incident. The deaths of American journalists in Vietnam and Cambodia also made headlines. But attacks against local journalists by repressive governments were generally not perceived as news.

That mind-set particularly troubled a young journalist named Laurie Nadel, who had been trying with little success to get editors in New York to cover the killing and imprisonment of journalists by military governments in Latin America. Nadel's concern was based on her own experience as a reporter for *Newsweek* and UPI in Chile, where she covered the aftermath of the 1973 coup that toppled President Salvador Allende. While in Santiago, she witnessed a neighbor being abducted by the secret police. After a source close to the Chilean military hinted that she risked the same fate, Nadel boarded the next departing flight with her reporter's notes taped to her body.

Back in New York, Nadel contacted Amnesty International and the National Council of Churches, and urged them to take up cases of imprisoned Latin American journalists. In 1975, she joined the Overseas Press Club, an association of foreign correspondents, where she started a human rights committee to organize letter-writing campaigns on behalf of imprisoned reporters. Nadel recalls that the club was ambivalent about sponsoring her campaign, and few journalists responded. In 1980, Nadel, now employed as a writer for CBS television news, spotted a Reuters story about a Paraguayan journalist facing arrest. Alcibiades González Delvalle happened to be in the United States on a State Department tour when he learned about his arrest warrant. Nadel called Michael Massing, then the young executive editor of *Columbia Journalism Review*, and asked him if he would be interested in a longer piece. Massing said yes. Nadel tracked down González Delvalle and interviewed him at her CBS office. A persistent critic of Paraguayan strongman Alfredo Stroessner, he had been indicted for criticizing the government's cover-up of its involvement in the killing of a 17-year-old boy. González Delvalle told Nadel he was determined to go home and face the charges.

Nadel and Massing spread the word that a courageous Paraguayan colleague was facing arrest. When González Delvalle was jailed after returning to Asunción in June 1980, Reuters and ANSA, the Italian news agency, filed dispatches. Warren Hoge, the *New York Times* correspondent in Brazil, flew to Paraguay, and in his report quoted González Delvalle's lawyer as saying, "Pressure from abroad is the only power the dictatorship respects." The Paraguayan government relented after 70 days. On September 2, González Delvalle was released from jail and resumed writing his column.

Nadel and Massing were amazed, and encouraged. Simply mobilizing press coverage of the arrest of a foreign journalist had led to his release. This suggested that a concerted response could assist other journalists in similar straits. Massing and Nadel also believed there was a larger principle at stake. Greater press freedom was inextricably linked to the global struggle for human rights, but there was no U.S. organization expressly dedicated to defending journalists when they became victims.

Massing sought to harness the power of the American press and used his position at the journalism review to reach out to the country's best-known journalists. Among those Massing first approached was Victor Navasky, then editor of *The Nation*, the venerable liberal weekly, who agreed on the need for an organization to protect journalists. "The beauty was that an organization of journalists could use the power of publicity, and the mission grew organically out of that," Navasky recalled. "I thought, This is a gap, and we can fill it." Other charter board members included the *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis, Jane Kramer of *The New Yorker*, Peter Arnett, then of the Associated Press, and Colman McCarthy, a cantankerous columnist for the *Washington Post*. Navasky also suggested that Massing approach Aryeh Neier, the newly named executive director of Helsinki Watch (which would later become Human Rights Watch).

Neier soon found room for the Committee to Protect Journalists in his organization's Manhattan office.

With the help of Dan Rather, who had just replaced Walter Cronkite as the anchor of the *CBS Evening News*, Nadel and Massing recruited Cronkite as CPJ's honorary chairman. During the Vietnam War, Cronkite headed a committee that gathered information about reporters and photographers who were missing in action. His involvement with CPJ confirmed Massing's hunch that the names on the letterhead would get government attention around the world.

In many ways, the time was right. New information technologies were nurturing a new generation of global journalists. A landmark was the founding of CNN in 1980 by Ted Turner, who sought to build a global audience by employing journalists bound by a code that transcended national origins. Furthermore, in the aftermath of the Watergate scandal, with the influence of the American press at its peak, American journalists more than ever felt their support could actually make a difference. If journalists could shake the White House, said David Marash, an anchor at WCBS in New York and an early board member, "Why can't we stop the bad guys from shaking down or beating up our colleagues around the world?"

The Latin American Crisis

Like Massing and Nadel, CPJ's early board members were especially involved in events in Latin America, as typified by the case of Jacobo Timerman.⁴ Following a March 1976 coup in Argentina, an army officer summoned editors in Buenos Aires and read this proclamation: "From today on, it is forbidden to report, comment on, or make reference to subversive incidents, the appearance of bodies and the deaths of subversive elements and/or members of the security forces unless they are announced by a responsible official source. This includes kidnappings

and disappearances." When Timerman, the editor of *La Opinión*, tentatively challenged the veil of silence by reporting on government abuses, he was abducted and imprisoned for nearly a year. Global protests impelled the generals to release Timerman, who recounted his ordeal in a classic memoir, *Prisoner Without a Name, Cell Without a Number*. In reviewing the memoir in 1981, CPJ board member Anthony Lewis noted the Argentine press's failure to cover the disappearances: "In some ways, the most terrible aspect of life in Argentina after the military took over was the silence."

For the early board members, this was a key challenge for the new organization. If the press fell silent, governments could literally get away with murder. At the time of CPJ's founding, the focus was on Central America, where journalists seeking to report human rights violations had themselves become targets of right-wing death squads. In early 1982, Michael Massing organized the first CPJ mission to Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. The press freedom issue was highly charged, given the debate over U.S. policy in the region, and Massing assembled a politically diverse delegation that ranged from the dovish former Vietnam correspondent Gloria Emerson to Allen Weinstein, editor of *The Washington Quarterly* and a supporter of the Reagan administration's Central America policy.

In his first year as president, Ronald Reagan had distanced himself from Jimmy Carter's human rights-based foreign policy, particularly in Central America, where the new administration was committed to defeating leftist insurgents in El Salvador. Washington argued that while excesses were occasionally committed by anti-leftist forces, the greater threat to press freedom was a pro-Communist victory and cited state censorship under leftist Sandinistas in Nicaragua to make its case. American journalists, who reported on violations committed by the Salvadoran military or by the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, were derided by

administration supporters as dupes. In El Salvador, the right-wing Arena party led by Roberto D'Aubuisson began a campaign of accosting journalists and shouting at them to "tell the truth." The taunts were menacing in an environment in which death squads flourished.

After traveling through El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, and meeting with foreign correspondents, local journalists, and government officials, the CPJ delegation was unable to reach a consensus. Its members expressed their disagreement at a New York press conference, and Weinstein later faulted the press for focusing on abuses in El Salvador at the expense of Nicaragua. "Should the Sandinistas maintain their 'state of emergency' indefinitely," he argued in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed, "there will be no independent journalists left practicing there, only pro-government flacks whose numbers grow steadily."

"At that point," Weinstein continued, "the Committee to Protect Journalists could send a second expeditionary force not only Nicaragua, but also to Cuba and Grenada, both omitted from its present itinerary. Of course, once free expression has disappeared from a country and the independent press has been crushed, there exist no journalists worthy of the name in need of protection except those in jail or in exile."

The Central America mission came close to splintering CPJ, but it also provided the organization a strategy for navigating ideological divides. The CPJ board concluded that its nonpartisan nature would be demonstrated not by politically balanced delegations, but by the clarity of its mandate, the diversity of its board, and the consistency of its approach. Policy debates were to take place in the home office, not among delegation members in the field. To operate above the ideological fray in the context of the Cold War, CPJ sought to put equal emphasis on repression by left and right. In news alerts and letters, CPJ drew attention to the plight of Ukrainian journalist Vyache-

slav Chornovil, who had spent most of the previous 15 years in the Soviet Gulag on charges of spreading "anti-Soviet propaganda," as well as the cases of two South African journalists imprisoned by the apartheid government. A second CPJ mission to South Africa and Zimbabwe carried out by Aryeh Neier and Laurie Nadel criticized the records of both the right-wing white minority government in South Africa and the left-leaning black nationalist government in Zimbabwe led by Robert Mugabe. The committee remained a small organization through much of the 1980s, but managed to have an impact on high-profile cases, including those of the British journalist Simon Winchester, who was detained along with two colleagues for 77 days in 1982 while reporting on the Falklands War in Argentina, and Terry Anderson, the Associated Press bureau chief in Beirut, who was kidnapped by a Hezbollah militia in 1985. After Anderson's release in 1991, he joined CPJ's board. More importantly, the organization's efforts to establish its independence allowed CPJ to play a more effective and visible role when the press freedom landscape was transformed by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

The Post-Soviet Press

At its core, the Soviet system rested on control of information. While telephone service was limited, Communist governments invested heavily in the media. Television, efficiently run and well-funded, was an essential component of the Communist Party's information strategy. It facilitated communication between the party and the people, while fostering the propagation of the historical myths that bound the society together.

However, there was an essential flaw with this system, which Mikhail Gorbachev recognized when he came to power in 1985. The problem was that Soviet citizens knew only what the government told them, and without a free press, government officials knew too little about what the Soviet people

thought of them. Gorbachev believed that improved communication and information technology was essential for the success of Perestroika, his program of economic restructuring. The media, he felt, would be a natural ally in his battle with the entrenched bureaucracy, and its critical coverage could also help build support for his policies. “The better informed the people are,” Gorbachev said, “the more intelligently they act and the more actively they support the Party and its plans and programmatic goals.”

But the public discussion of Stalin’s legacy, which Gorbachev encouraged, soon turned into an exhaustive examination of Soviet history that exposed the myths and undermined the legitimacy of the entire Communist system. Reports on corruption and inefficiency became a general critique of the overall management of Soviet society. These reports, broadcast on television and radio, and published in newspapers and magazines whose circulation soared, infuriated Kremlin hardliners. In August 1991, they deposed Gorbachev in a bloodless coup while he was on holiday in the Crimea.

The coup leaders understood the necessity of asserting control over the media and did so by forcibly taking over the main broadcast facilities and banning all but a handful of newspapers. But the media had grown larger and more diverse in the Gorbachev years, making it much harder to control. Many newspapers defied the order, printing photocopied editions that made their way back on the street. At a press conference broadcast live on Soviet television on the evening of the coup, its leaders were bombarded with questions, including one from a young newspaper correspondent who asked, “Could you please say whether or not you understand that last night you carried out a coup d’état?”

Later that night, an extraordinary broadcast showed barricades being erected around the Russian White House as Boris Yeltsin

stood atop a tank and issued his famous appeal. As the former *Baltimore Sun* correspondent Scott Shane writes in *Dismantling Utopia: How Information Ended the Soviet Union* (1994), “It was a revolution driven by information that the coup was designed to halt: information that had undermined ideology, exposed the bureaucracy, and shattered the Soviet family of nations. But it was also the liberating power of information that doomed the coup to failure—both the information that had changed people’s views, and the information that now fueled the resistance with minute-to-minute reports.”

The Communist collapse liberated a new breed of journalists across Russia and the former Soviet Union. The best were filled with anger about past abuses and used their technical skills to reveal suppressed truths to the public. They also reported aggressively on long-hidden corruption and social ills as the old system disintegrated. Meanwhile, in Latin America, where democracy had been restored following the demise of military dictatorships, the press played a similar role. In Brazil, aggressive reporting on the elaborate kickback and corruption schemes of President Fernando Affonso Collor de Mello led to his resignation in 1992. In Argentina, investigative journalists reported on corruption and abuse by the country’s new civilian leaders while revealing the true extent of the dictatorship’s dirty war. Journalist Horacio Verbitksy’s 1995 groundbreaking book *The Flight* told the story of navy officer Alfredo Scilingo who confessed to his own participation in pushing live political prisoners from airplanes. In polls taken at the time in much of Latin America, the press was consistently named the most trusted institution, ahead of the Catholic Church.

The role of the press in Latin America and across Eastern Europe fueled massive investment in independent media by both U.S. government agencies and private foundations, which viewed the independent me-

dia both as a means of challenging autocratic regimes and building support for democracy. Media, unlike other democratic institutions such as political parties or an independent judiciary, could be created quickly and could thrive even amid political upheaval. According to one study, at least \$600 million was invested between 1993 and 2003 by the U.S. Agency for International Development, the U.S. Information Service, and the Soros Foundation. In 1994, the State Department created the Office of Transition Initiatives to “promote peace and democracy” in countries undergoing periods of political change.⁵ Support for independent media was a key component of this strategy.

These initiatives had an immediate impact, especially in Russia and elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, where international funding helped fuel an explosion of new media outlets. The initial success of these efforts reinforced the notion that the press was the vanguard of democracy. But they also created the conditions that led the rise of the “democratators.”

Back to the Future

Even as he organized and incited ethnic cleansing across the former Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, President Slobodan Milosevic sought to maintain a semblance of international legitimacy. He stood for election, publicly expressed support for democracy, tolerated the existence of opposition parties, and allowed the Belgrade print media that catered to the urban elites to publish stories critical of the government. He also employed strategies that other democratic despots would refine in later years—polarizing society in order to create a sense of perpetual crisis, mobilizing his supporters into political shock troops, relying on tax laws and administrative harassment more than outright repression to punish opponents, and using control over television to manipulate public opinion. In fact, Milosevic’s control of Serbian state television was essential.

He used it not only to secure his electoral victories but also to build support for the ethnic cleansing campaign in Bosnia.

While autocratic governments have long held sham elections, Milosevic’s efforts responded to a new reality. With the end of the Cold War, repressive leaders lost not only a patron in the Soviet Union but also the ideological cover they used to justify suppression of internal dissent. The demise of communism (also heralded as the “end of history”) meant that you were either a democrat or a dictator, and Milosevic understood that an out-and-out dictatorship would open the door for intervention in Yugoslavia’s ethnic conflict. So he professed support for democracy, claiming his government reflected the will of the Serbian people. It followed that any interference by outside powers must reflect an irrational hatred of Serbs. Milosevic’s use of the broadcast media to build support for ethnic cleaning was particularly troubling. It not only challenged the emerging notion that the press was generally a tool for democratic change but also allowed Milosevic to portray efforts by Western governments to suppress hate speech as an attack on press freedoms.⁶

The Yugoslav conflict forced CPJ and other press freedom groups to modify their advocacy strategies. It was one thing to champion a journalist jailed by a traditional dictatorship; it was another to defend on principle a Serbian publication that may have closed its eyes to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia but was still facing legal harassment because of its criticism of Milosevic.

Milosevic bought time with his democratic doublespeak, but the atrocities he committed were so egregious that they could not be covered up with a few elections. Vladimir Putin, on the other hand, has smoothed out the kinks, and, with limited outcry, has gained a level of control over the Russian media that Milosevic vainly sought. Granted, the behavior of many of Russia’s media moguls helped Putin. While Russia’s private broadcast

networks employed many talented and committed young journalists and initially gained public acclaim with hard-hitting stories on corruption and mismanagement, the owners of the major national broadcast networks were tainted from the start because they had obtained their wealth in shady deals during the chaotic period that followed the Soviet collapse.

Vladimir Gusinsky, who owned the NTV network, and Boris Berezovsky, who owned a controlling stake in the rival ORT network, both used their media holdings to advance their own economic and political interests. In the 1996 elections, they joined forces with President Boris Yeltsin, rationalizing their partisanship by arguing that a victory for Yeltsin's Communist rival would end press freedom. The networks split over Putin during the 2000 presidential election, when he ran as Yeltsin's handpicked successor. While Berezovsky backed Putin, Gusinsky blatantly favored Putin's opponents. After winning the presidency, Putin was quick to take revenge, sending the tax police to raid NTV. When Berezovsky also began to criticize the new government, Putin moved against him as well, using legal prosecutions and government-backed hostile takeovers to bring both networks under Kremlin control. The Russian public was largely indifferent because it did not perceive the media as an independent check on government power. Instead, many believed, with some justification, that the networks had picked the losing side in an ugly political battle and had gotten their comeuppance.⁷

Media moguls in Venezuela made a similar mistake when they galvanized the opposition to President Hugo Chávez. During late 2001 and early 2002, as strikes and protests convulsed the country, the media launched a relentless attack on the government and encouraged people to take to the streets. Then, after Chávez was deposed in a coup on April 11, 2002, Venezuelan television news suddenly fell silent, broadcasting movies instead and ignoring the rallies

by Chávez supporters calling for the return of the ousted president. Frustrated Venezuelans tuned to CNN or broadcasts from neighboring Colombia to find out what was taking place in their own country. When Chávez triumphantly returned to power three days later, the media was largely discredited. In attempting to generate international opposition to the Chávez government, media owners had exaggerated threats to press freedom in the country, equating Chávez's verbal fusillades with direct censorship. Hence, in the aftermath of the coup, when the government took actual legal measures to curtail press freedom, there was little public outcry. The Law of Social Responsibility in Radio and Television, passed in December 2004, makes it a crime for broadcasters to disseminate messages that "promote, defend, or incite breaches of public order" or "are contrary to the security of the nation."

The new legislation gives Chávez legal cover for muffling the press, but unlike Putin, he has not moved directly against the media. Instead, the president simply periodically preempts regular programming to make longwinded speeches on everything from politics to baseball. In general, he allows relative freedom to report on his country's social crisis because it serves his interests. The existence of a critical media allows Chávez to deflect international criticism, while reports on rising crime, decaying infrastructure, and even international coverage highlighting political tensions permits him to cast himself as the alternative to chaos.

The U.S. Perspective

Since the September 11 attacks, the Bush administration has made the promotion of democracy a key global goal. "[I]t is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world," Bush declared in his second inaugural address. Yet, many administration

policies have backfired, including efforts to promote press freedom. Following September 11, autocratic leaders opportunistically borrowed the language of the “war on terrorism” to justify their repressive policies. Many cited administration measures as proof that even democracies restrict civil liberties—including freedom of the press—in times of crisis. The most flagrant example was President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe. A spokesman for Mugabe defended the country’s legal prosecution of journalists, saying, “We agree with...President Bush that anyone who in any way finances, harbors, or defends terrorists is himself a terrorist.”

In Iraq, under pressure to show progress, U.S. officials point to elections, competing political parties, and the relatively unfettered local press. But while the Iraqi press has benefited from an infusion of U.S. aid, it has also become increasingly partisan and some analysts fear it may exacerbate ethnic tensions.⁸ Certainly, Iraq has become extremely dangerous for the media, with 101 journalists and media workers killed as of June 2006. Many of those killed were Iraqis murdered by insurgents.⁹

More broadly, while calling for democracy throughout the Middle East and settling for far less in Iraq, U.S. policy reinforces the belief that cosmetic changes will suffice. This is certainly the case in Egypt, where President Hosni Mubarak, having won a fifth consecutive six-year term with nearly 90 percent of the vote last fall, appears to be moving in the direction of the new autocrats. Despite pledges to loosen press controls, the Mubarak government has tightened legal restrictions and jailed journalists for reporting critical of the regime.¹⁰

Finally, the Bush administration’s efforts to link liberalizing goals to narrow security interests makes it easier for autocratic leaders to portray democracy-building efforts as interference in their domestic affairs. President Putin, for example, has suggested that nongovernmental organizations promoting

democracy in Russia serve as a Trojan horse for Western governments seeking to undermine the state. A new statute signed into law by Putin on January 10 gives the Russian authorities the right to shut down NGOs engaged in activities deemed harmful to the “political independence of the Russian Federation.”

Nonetheless, elections—no matter how controlled—can be unpredictable, as Gen. Augusto Pinochet learned in Chile in 1988, and as the leaders of Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan discovered more recently. But the new breed of more sophisticated autocrats presents a significant challenge for press freedom, precisely because they are well aware of these risks and are increasingly adept at managing the media. Without institutional safeguards to protect free expression, the press is at the mercy of the new leaders exploiting periods of instability. For this reason, much of the money spent building independent media around the world has been squandered. Media development must go hand in hand with nurturing the institutions that protect journalists from state interference. Without safeguards, the media is not only highly vulnerable to repression but can be manipulated by partisan factions, as happened in Yugoslavia and seems to be occurring in Iraq.

Precisely because mechanisms of repression are more complex, their exposure can require exacting research. Recent CPJ reports document government surveillance in Tunisia, self-censorship in Colombia, legal harassment in Turkey, and intimidation of the press in Yemen. These reports are only the first step in sustained campaigns to defend press freedom. Recent victories include the repeal of a criminal defamation law in Mexico City, a pledge by Yemen’s president to investigate abuses, and a public rebuke by President Alvaro Uribe of Colombia of local officials who impede the work of the press.

The traditional strategies long employed by international human rights groups—

highlighting individual cases and generating international censure—are still valid. But they are less effective against the new autocrats who avoid making themselves an easy target by putting a prominent dissident in jail. Instead, they intimidate the media with punitive tax prosecutions and defamation suits, or influence coverage through personal relationships with media owners or allocation of government advertising funds.

Because these practices also exist to a greater or lesser extent in democratic countries, press freedom groups must not only document and expose the mechanisms of control but demonstrate that specific practices violate domestic and international legal standards. The battle is not against a political ideology but against a repressive strategy that is evolving and adapting in response to international and domestic pressures. The Committee to Protect Journalists and other press freedom groups must be prepared to wage a long war of attrition to discredit each new repressive technique so that the “democratators,” against their will, one day find themselves presiding over democracies in which the press is truly free and the people can peacefully remove them from power. ●

Notes

1. From a talk by Lipman, who is the editor of *Pro et Contra*, published by the Moscow Carnegie Center, and a columnist for the *Washington Post*, at CPJ on March 24, 2006, titled “Constrained or Irrelevant: The Media in Putin’s Russia.” Lipman published an article with the same title in the October 2005 edition of *Current History*.

2. While the Russian government has not been directly implicated in violent attacks, it has tolerated a climate of violence and intimidation against the media. Twelve journalists have been killed in contract-style killings since Vladimir Putin came to office, and none of these crimes have been adequately investigated, according to CPJ research. On May 5, two men accused of carrying out the murder of the Russian-American journalist Paul Klebnikov, gunned down on July 9, 2004, in Moscow, were acquitted in

a Russian court. CPJ criticized the trial proceedings and accused Putin of “tolerating impunity” (<http://www.cpj.org/news/2006/europe/russia05may06na.html>).

3. On May 2, in honor of World Press Freedom Day, CPJ released “The World’s 10 Most Censored Countries.” Topping the list was North Korea, which the report labeled “the world’s deepest information void,” followed by Burma, Turkmenistan, Equatorial Guinea, and Libya. Eritrea, Cuba, Uzbekistan, Syria, and Belarus round out the top ten. Largely throwbacks to an earlier era, most of these countries make no pretense of being democratic.

4. Timerman’s 1977 abduction raised international awareness about the lack of press freedom in Latin America, as did the 1978 murder of *La Prensa* editor Pedro Joaquín Chamorro by national guardsmen in Managua. That murder, which sparked widespread disgust in Nicaragua, marked the beginning of the end of the Somoza regime. The killing of ABC correspondent Bill Stewart in 1979, captured on tape and broadcast on American television, sealed the dictator’s fate.

5. See Ellen Hume, *The Media Missionaries: American Support for Journalism Excellence and Press Freedom around the World*, a report for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, 2004.

6. The role of the media in the 1994 Rwandan genocide—in which a nominally private radio station helped organize and direct the killings carried out by Hutu militias—is a potent reminder that the media can be destructive. Jack Snyder, in *From Voting to Violence: Democratization and Nationalist Conflict* (New York: Norton, 2000), argues that rather than promoting peaceful coexistence, an unfettered media in politically unstable societies often fuels ethnic violence.

7. See Peter Baker and Susan Glasser, *Kremlin Rising: Vladimir Putin’s Russia and the End of Revolution* (New York: Scribner, 2005), pp. 78–98.

8. See Louise Roug, “The Conflict in Iraq; Unfair, Unbalanced Channels,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 28, 2006.

9. Seventy-four journalists and 27 media workers have been killed in Iraq, according to CPJ statistics. Of the journalists, 53 were Iraqis, as opposed to 2 Americans. Insurgents are responsible for the deaths of 48 journalists, many of them targeted killings. U.S. forces have been implicated in 14

deaths, which CPJ classifies as crossfire deaths, having found no evidence to conclude that any were deliberate. For a complete statistical breakdown on journalists killed in Iraq, go to http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/Iraq/Iraq_danger.html.

10. See CPJ's February 23, 2006 letter to Hosni Mubarak, at <http://www.cpj.org/protests/06ltrs/mideast/egypt23feb06pl.html>.