
Journalism, Free Speech and Media Bias in a Rapidly Changing World

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Good evening to all distinguished colleagues, media professionals, faith-based NGO representatives and defenders of freedom joining us from around the world.

In our information-saturated age, the stories we tell – and those we neglect to tell – determine not only what people know, but what they believe to be true.

Two Freedoms, One Destiny

The subject I address this evening — *Media Bias and Democratic Freedoms: Protecting Religious Minorities* — transcends theory and scholarship. It strikes at the core of our shared existence. For when one of our twin freedoms — belief and expression — crumbles, the other does not stand far behind.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights Articles 18 and 19 were not drafted as separate pillars; they were laid side by side so that thought, conscience, religion and voice might flourish together. Without the freedom to believe, expression becomes hollow — and without the freedom to speak, belief becomes invisible. They are two sides of the same coin. When one collapses, the other quickly follows.

That is why media bias is not merely sloppy journalism — it is a profound human-rights issue. A press that distorts realities doesn't only mis-report — it shapes public perception, legitimises repression and corrodes democracy from within.

Research confirms this link: diminished media freedom correlates with weakened democratic safeguards and increased rights violations. As the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) states:

“Freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression are mutually reinforcing and indispensable for democracy and the rule of law.”

And as the Washington Post reminds us:

“Democracy dies in darkness.”

When journalism goes silent—or worse, joins the mob—democracy begins to die from within.

When the Press Echoes the Powerful

Consider this case: In Rwanda authorities, beginning in 2018, mandated inspections of faith-venues; by 2024 the national governance board reported inspecting more than 13,000 places of worship and closing over 8,000 for alleged safety or registration violations. Many believe the true motive was regulatory pressure on minority religions. In much of the press coverage the language sounded harmless — “compliance”, “modernization”, “standards” — but the reality was stark: pastors silenced, congregations scattered, believers locked out of their sanctuaries. Most media outlets simply echoed the official line. Reports spoke of “regulations” but ignored religious freedom or human dignity.

Whenever journalists merely repeat government talking-points, persecution hides in plain sight — and democracy loses its voice.

The Press: Guardian or Enabler?

Article 19 declares the right “to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media.” A free press should be democracy’s watchdog — not its echo-chamber. But when journalism becomes biased, sensationalist or submissive, it stops defending freedom and begins enabling oppression.

When a press system abandons religious minorities, it signals a broader erosion: freedom of religion and freedom of expression are not separate rights, but deeply connected. As one UN-mission summary puts it, they are “indivisible and interdependent”. That means the media bears a heavy burden — not just to report facts, but to handle language, labels and narratives with care. Because the way events are framed affects who is included in public life, and who is pushed to its margins.

Labels Matter: The “S-Word” & Headlines That Kill

Words, images and headlines shape public opinion. That framing can either defend dignity or legitimise prejudice.

One of the clearest dangers: how minority faiths are casually branded with the “S-word” — “sect” — or its cousin “cult”. That reminds us of the dark past when the “N-word” was used as a racial slur against people of colour. Being labelled a “sect member” can wound, exclude, and delegitimise in equally damaging ways.

And yet journalists keep using it freely — sometimes dozens of times in a single report. In Austria, for instance, the national broadcaster recently used the word “sect” 13 times in just two minutes of airtime. Behind this obsession lies not only organised anti-cult networks but also plain journalistic laziness: reliance on Wikipedia entries, decades-old dossiers, or press-releases disguised as facts. Over time these shortcuts harden into “common-sense” prejudice.

In France, the state-agency MIVILUDES circulates lists of alleged “sectes” that many journalists cite uncritically — turning yoga practitioners, Pentecostals, Buddhists and new Christian movements into public suspects. This systemic framing — stigma embedded in blacklists, amplified in media — sets the stage for more serious consequences.

Now consider Russia: where independent media have been stamped out and journalists killed by state actors. Years of demonisation in state-controlled media paved the way for the 2017

ban of the Jehovah's Witnesses as "extremist". Over 200,000 believers were forced underground or into exile. A single label — "extremist cult" — turned peaceful worship into a criminal act. Once a label is normalised, repression is only a step away.

Headlines can kill reputations, or as one grim media-adage goes: "If it bleeds, it leads." Research shows that roughly 60-70 % of readers never read beyond the headline; for most, the headline *is* the story. When journalism trades truth for outrage, it does more than mis-inform — it destroys trust and weakens democracy.

Case Study: BBC and the Family Federation for World Peace and Unification

A sharp example of distortion: In October 2023 the BBC ran a headline:

"Japan asks court to dissolve 'Moonies' church over Shinzo Abe killing."

Two things stand out: first, the use of the term "Moonies" — a slur to the faith community. Second: the headline merges the church with a killing. The assassin of former Prime-Minister Shinzo Abe was a lone individual, acting from personal grievance, with no organisational link to the church. Yet the headline effectively portrayed the community as responsible. Because it came from one of the world's most trusted media brands, the damage reverberated worldwide. What began as tragedy became a three-year headline campaign. This is not investigative reporting. It is character-assassination by headline.

Global Patterns: Media Bias → Repression → Loss of Freedom

From one region to another the pattern repeats: media bias leads to stigma, which prompts state action, then brings repression — and ultimately results in a loss of freedom.

- **Japan:** After the Abe assassination, thousands of articles attacked the faith community. Government officials, anti-cult lawyers and mainstream media built a firewall of hostility; believers' voices were excluded.
- **South Korea:** Even large mainstream churches faced smear campaigns. More alarmingly, Dr. Hwak Ja Han Moon (82) — a founder of interfaith initiatives — was placed in pre-trial detention weeks after heart surgery. Much of the press recycled stereotypes instead of questioning the measure.
- **Nigeria & Sub-Saharan Africa:** Between 2019-2023 nearly 56,000 died and 21,000 abducted in violence with a religious dimension — mostly Christians. Yet Western media routinely reduced these atrocities to "ethnic clashes" or "farmer-herder disputes". This silence—this refusal to name genocide for what it is—not neutrality; it is complicity.
- **China:** The Communist Party has mastered state propaganda. Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong practitioners and unregistered Christian house-churches are branded "cults" or "terrorists". Once labelled, they are stripped of rights, detained, or forced into "re-education". State-media transforms persecution into policy and propaganda into truth.
- **Hungary:** In 2011 the Orbán government stripped >300 churches of legal recognition; most media outlets called it "reform". When the same regime later attacked independent journalism, reporters realised too late — the assault on religion had paved the way for the assault on the press.
- **India:** In 2024 Christian organisations documented over 800 attacks and wrongful arrests. In Manipur, sectarian violence displaced 60,000 and destroyed nearly 400

churches. Much of the Indian media called it a “law-and-order issue”, refusing to name religious persecution.

What Must We Do? A Shared Responsibility

Defending freedom is everyone’s task.

- Journalists must verify before publishing, avoid stigmatising labels, and let minorities speak for themselves.
- Editors must treat headlines as promises, not hammers.
- Regulators and public broadcasters must monitor systemic bias and ensure taxpayer-funded media serve *all* citizens.
- Faith communities and civil society must monitor coverage, respond factually, and share positive stories of peace-building, humanitarian aid and inter-faith cooperation.

If hostile networks flood journalists with prejudice, defenders of freedom can flood them with truth and hope.

Closing Thoughts

We are not here to silence critics. Scrutiny—honest, balanced scrutiny— is vital for democracy. But scrutiny without fairness becomes slander. When media bias targets religious minorities, it harms not only those communities—it undermines the moral core of democracy itself. A free press should defend the vulnerable, not endanger them; challenge power, not echo it.

As Mahatma Gandhi once said:

“The true measure of any society can be found in how it treats its most vulnerable members.”

When the press stays silent in the face of injustice, that silence becomes complicity.

I commend the Universal Peace Federation – USA and IMAP for organising this important dialogue and elevating it to the international level.

Thank you for your attention.
